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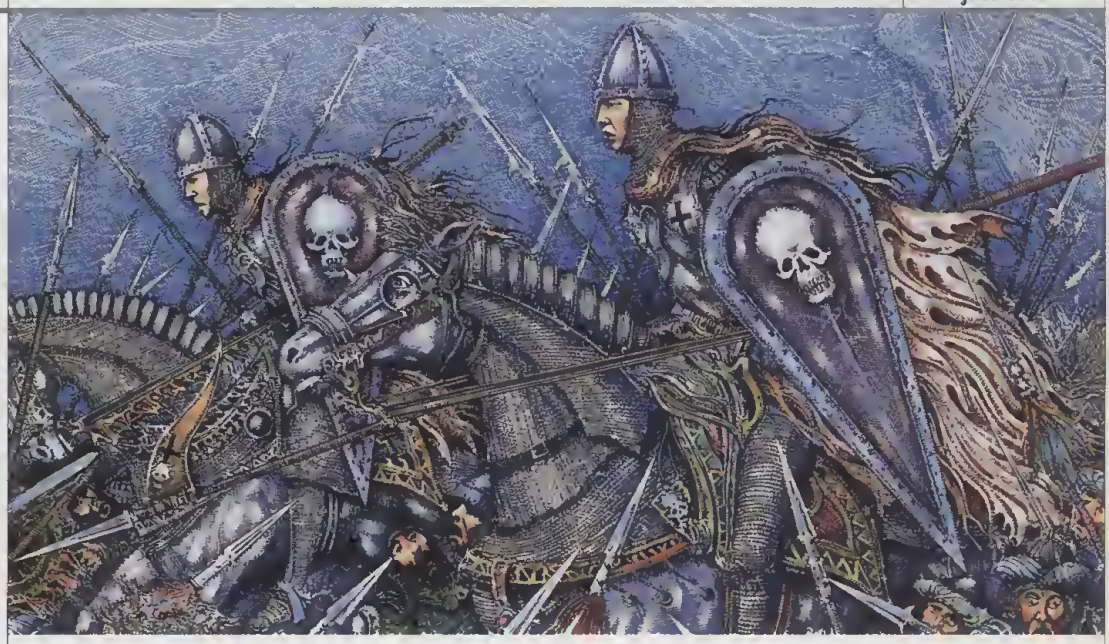
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COVER: Eleanor of Aquitaine on Horse © *Kinuko Y. Craft (detail from the cover art on the artist's upcoming 2004 calendar).*

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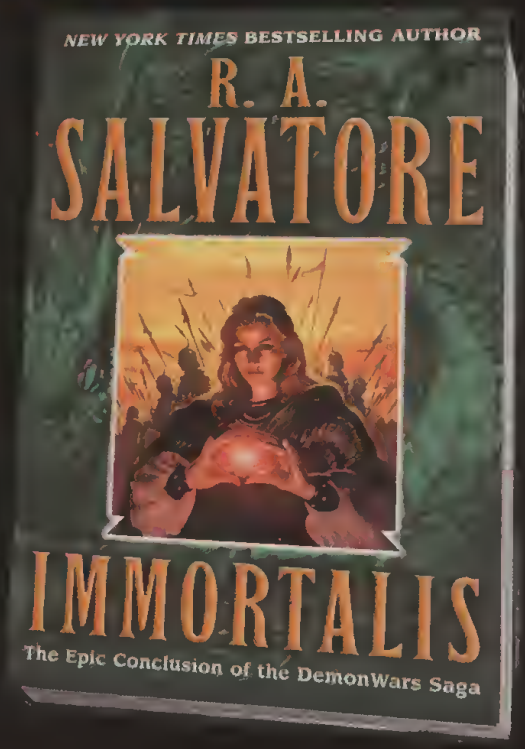
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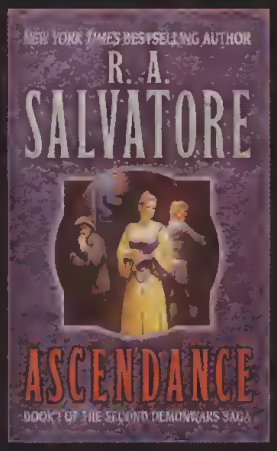
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JANE FRANK, along with her husband Howard, is a well-known and longtime art collector who in 1991 founded the art agency Worlds of Wonder when she discovered how few artists in the sci-fi/fantasy genre were able to gain exposure for their art beyond the opportunities afforded by conventions devoted to the field. In addition to publishing numerous magazine articles and essays on artists and the art of collecting, she co-authored (with Howard) an art book documenting their 30+-year collecting habit, *The Frank Collection: A Showcase of the World's Fantastic Art* (Paper Tiger, 1999). A second book on their collection, *Great Fantasy Themes from the Frank Collection,* will be published in spring 2003, and *The Art of John Berkey* is due out in fall 2003.

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DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Ari Berk

Where the white stag runs—boundary and transformation in deer myths.



The Lady Clare by John William Waterhouse

Deer are creatures of the borderlands, appearing in stories as Otherworldly spouses, lovers, siblings, and children, where folk wander from one world into the another.

Down from the houses of magic,
Down from the houses of magic,
Blow the winds, and from my antlers
And my ears the stronger gather.

Over there I ran trembling,
Over there I ran trembling,
For bows and arrows pursued me.
Many bows were on my trail.
—Black Tailed Deer Song, Pima

I have lately heard strange stories from northern lower Michigan of the Deer Man. Well, it's hunting season here so such tales are dragged out and polished up to tell around the fire at hunting camp. Some say that the Deer Man haunts the woods near Houghton Lake; others say he's in the Thumb. He's a strange one, no doubt, and he covers a lot of ground on his two legs. He has the body of man and the large head and antlers of a stag: Michigan's own Hern the Hunter. He uses his antlers to leave his calling-card on the door-posts of local churches and at night, in the wilds, he can be heard bellowing to his four-legged brothers.

At this time of the year, the deer venture often into our realm. Last night in my front yard, a herd of deer—thick and wooly-looking with their winter coats—were feeding on fallen rowan berries. This morning, their tracks could be seen making spirals in the snow around the base of the rowan tree and wandering off down the street, marking their path back to the woods. Although deer are certainly not rare (especially here in Michigan), their appearance brings the feeling of wilderness close, reminding me that we are only ever a few paces away from the forest, from the wild, from the edges of the living storied land.

As long as people have lived or hunted alongside the deer's habitats, there have been stories: some of kindly creatures who become the wives of mortals; or of lost children changed into deer for a time, reminding their kin to honor the relationship with the Deer People, their close neighbors. And there are darker tales, recalling strange journeys into the Otherworld, abductions, and dangerous transformations that don't end well at all. But all stories about the deer share some common ground by showing us that the line between our world and theirs is very thin indeed.

Ovid tells us in his *Metamorphoses* of youthful Actaeon who spends the day hunting with his dogs on the hillsides, catching so much game that the slopes run red with blood. As the sun ascends the sky,

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he calls off the chase, bidding his comrades retire with the promise of renewing the hunt early the next day. Then he does a dangerous thing: He wanders for a time in a wood he does not know, and so comes by accident to the sacred grotto where Diana is accustomed to bathing with her nymphs. To Actaeon's great misfortune, he spies the goddess of the hunt naked and she, seeing him, blushes. Then lifting up her hands, she throws water in Actaeon's face and he flees that place. As he wanders back to find his friends he hears his dogs barking and sees that they are chasing him. Confused, he calls out to them, but instead of his voice, he hears the bellowing of a great stag, for stag he now is, transformed by the goddess's vengeful hand. So he runs fast on four legs but soon his dogs chase him down and, tearing him apart, find their old master toothsome indeed.

The myth of Actaeon is an early example of the connection of deer stories with the violation of taboos. Actaeon made three fatal errors: overhunting the hillside, entering a sacred enclosure unknowingly, and gazing upon the virgin mistress of the hunt. His punishment is perfectly suited to address his errors for he learns to see the world, though briefly, from the perspective of a shy creature who calls the wild home and instinctively respects its boundaries.

In the medieval Welsh *Mabinogion,* does and stags appear as physical manifestations of the boundary between worlds. In the story of "Pwyll," the deer are followed into the forest during a hunt. But Pwyll, the prince, and his dogs are soon separated from his companions and he finds himself lost in the woods. Soon he hears other dogs and, following their barking, comes upon a clearing in the woods where he finds a strange pack—red-eared and white-furred—bearing down upon a stag. Pwyll chases those dogs off and sets his own upon the stag instead, most discourteously. When he later meets the owner of the white dogs—who is none other than the Arawn, lord of the Otherworld—satisfaction is demanded and Pwyll must repay Arawn by assuming his form and exchanging places, traveling into the Otherworld to kill one of Arawn's enemies. So following the deer is often a way into the Otherworld, or a sign that we are very close to its borders.

Fans of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* will be very familiar with these motifs, remembering the children who, after having grown up in the Otherworldly Narnia, hunt the white stag following it deep into the forest, and are, very suddenly, deposited back into their own world again, returned to childhood. Lewis's fellow Inkling, J.R.R. Tolkien, called upon the white stag in *The Hobbit.* Here it serves to mark the borders of the Wood Elves' realm when a white hind and some fawns appear on the path before the company who hear the "dim blowing of horns" deep within Mirkwood Forest.

Both these authors drew on their extensive knowledge of medieval literature, where the connection of deer with Faerie is most common. Other examples abound in early writings. In one of the numerous popular tellings about Thomas the Rhymer, Thomas is interrupted while reveling with his friends. He is told by a fearful and astonished messenger that a hind and a hart have left the forest and are—slowly and with great grace—pacing up and down the street of the village. Thomas rises at once and follows the deer into the forest, never seen to return. Here the deer become the heralds of Elfland, physical embodiments of the faery call, and their appearance is the prelude to Thomas's transition from this world to the Other.

Boundaries exist between worlds, but they are also present between people. Where rules of conduct are expressed, the deer is also found, symbolically marking the moments when such rules are broken, emphasizing the often dire consequences. The anonymous early French ballad, "La Chasse" (more lately translated by Andrew Lang and called, "The Milk White Doe"), draws our attention to the representation of female innocence as a white deer, as well as the symbolic presence (in hunting and chasing) of male aggression, sexual tension, and taboo between siblings. The ballad begins with a mother asking her daughter why she is so sad, and the girl replies,

For ever in the good daylight
A maiden may I go,
But always on the ninth midnight
I change to a milk white doe.
They hunt me through the green forest
With hounds and hunting men;
And ever it is my fair brother
That is so fierce and keen.

Their mother asks her son about his dogs and is told they are hunting a white doe in the forest,

And three times they have chased her,
And thrice she's run away;
The fourth time that they follow her
That white doe they shall slay.
(Skelton)

After the white doe is killed, the young man learns that it is indeed his own sister. Then, like the guilty youths of so many medieval tales, he goes to the greenwood himself, for "seven long years," embracing madness for a time, burying his grief within the wilds.

Other ballads and tales about deer continue the theme of sibling adventures. One Danish ballad ("Jomfruen I Linden") has the usual cruel stepmother transforming her children into a variety of creatures, including fleeting deer, hawks, and a linden tree. In another Danish ballad, "The Maid Transformed into a Hind," a young girl begs her brother to spare a little deer that plays about his feet. The brother does not heed her, shooting the deer. When he flays it, he finds his sister under the hind's skin. We then learn that the sister has been put under a spell by her step-mother and can only be freed by drinking her brother's blood. He immediately cuts his fingers, allowing her to drink. She is restored, becoming a young girl again and later is happily married (Wimberly). In this tale, we may assume that even the most difficult of sibling relations may be resolved through the remembrance of the bonds of consanguinity. More troubling (though common in early literature) is the notion that the sister's future happiness in life is dependent upon her brother's gift of blood, or acceptance of her liminal state—a sign that the girl's life is never entirely her own.

In Devon, England, a rare ritual has been recorded wherein the stag represented the offense or misconduct (often of a sexual nature) of a local person. A mock "hunt" was enacted with characters playing the stag, dog, and hunters. This strange and noisy pageant of implication was run through the village, ending finally at the doorstep of the offender. There the stag was "killed" with all ceremony, even including the bursting of a bladder full of blood. It was thought that after such a communal condemnation, the offender would leave the village never to return. (Simpson and Roud)

Most stories of the deer in Europe are now primarily legendary, anecdotal, or ritual—scat-

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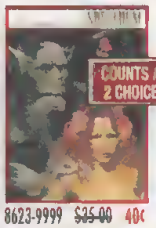
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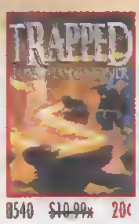
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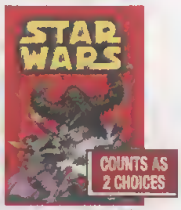
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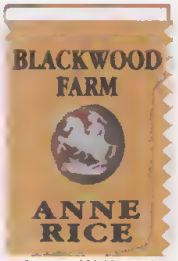
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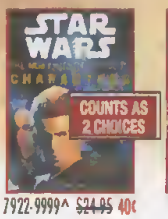
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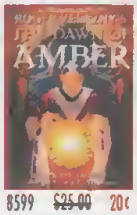
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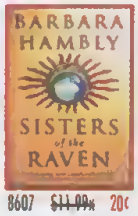
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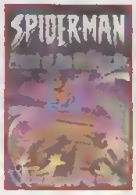
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tered through folk tales and ballads. They exist in the twilight of rural custom once the ancient myths are forgotten or broken apart—turning from sacred narrative to secular fairy tale over the centuries. So even now, deer can be elusive, and if we want a better look we may have to chase a little further afield.

Deer is a common figure in American Indian myths, often appearing in stories that continue the focus on families, kinship, marriage, child-rearing, hunting, and pursuit.

Among the Pueblos of New Mexico, stories are still told of Deer Boy, a baby left in the grass, abandoned by its young mother, a girl of the village. It was a Deer Woman who found the human child and brought him home to raise with her own fawns. Time passed and the boy spent the days running with his fawn brothers and sisters. Some time later, a hunter from the village noticed strange tracks among those left by the Deer People. The Deer Woman knew the time had come for the boy to return to his people. She readied him to be caught by the hunter and told him what he must know about his real mother and what she looked like. She told him that to remain among his own people he must, upon returning to the village, be left alone and unseen in a room for four days. So he was found by the hunter and taken home and much happiness attended his homecoming. The boy told his family he must be left alone for four days and they agreed. But his birth mother, so impatient was she, stole a glance at her son before the four days were finished. In an instant the boy took on the shape of a deer and ran to the North where he joined his other mother and lived for the rest of his days among the Deer People.



From Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire's *Book of Greek Myths*

ABOVE: Crossing a dangerous boundary between the mortal world and the forest of the divine, Actaeon chances to view Diana the hunt goddess in her bath and is changed by her into a stag as punishment. OPPOSITE: Deer Dancers are found among most of the Native American Pueblos of the Southwest. In the act of dance, the performer becomes the Deer for a time, borrowing its power to bless and aid the land's fertility.

Many of the stories about deer in American Indian myths continue (as in Europe) to reflect a strong belief in sexual taboos, such as those that exist between members of the same family, siblings especially. The Apache tell a story about a brother and sister that go out hunting together (Opler). They make separate camps (this is emphasized because of strong beliefs about the separation of boys and girl after puberty). The boy is not knowledgeable about the Deer People and kills many female deer, which his sister then helps him to prepare. While the tale is somewhat ambivalent about the nature of the broken taboo (and there are certainly several in the story), there appears to be an emphasis upon and connection between both appropriate sibling conduct and the acceptable number and sex of animals taken at one time. As a result of the boy's actions and lack of knowledge—he makes no prayers and does not prepare the meat correctly—a large male deer comes to their camp and leads the sister away into the West where she has two children—both of them fawns—and becomes a deer herself. Her children are later found by the brother, who is told to keep them out of sight for a time. Again he does not obey the rules, and the little fawns leave forever. From this tale the Apache learned how the Deer People must be treated and took more care from then on.

This kind of respect was vital to both successful hunting and health in general. A Cherokee myth tells of a council held by the Deer People where it was decided that any hunter who did not ask for pardon from the deer would become sick and rheumatic. News of this decision was spread among the human villages and settlements. Now whenever a deer is shot, the "Little Deer" comes like the wind to that spot, leans down over the blood on the earth, and asks the deer's spirit if the hunter prayed for its pardon. If the hunter did so, all will be well. But if not, Little Deer will follow the trail of that hunter and finding him, cripple him. (Mooney)

In Southern Arizona, the Tohono O'odham tribe also speak of Deer's importance and power in relation to sustenance. When the People first came from the world below, Elder Brother gave them deer as their food. But as the First Food, deer meat has special curative powers. When the first deer of the season is caught, it is cooked while people sing; then, when it's given out, people crowd around saying, "Give me life." Deer was made by Elder Brother by taking a small desert mouse and slitting it up the middle to form a deer. Then Elder Brother gave gifts to the Deer: the wind as a friend, ears that can hear the earth shake under the feet of humans, and the ability to know when its time had come. So we learn that it is by choice that the deer gives itself to the hunter (Underhill). Stories such as these stress the importance of interdependence of various species or People—a word that is always applied to both human and animals in American Indian cultures.

Many tribes have dances associated with deer, bringing the myths to life in a kind of sacred drama. In California, among the Yurok, Deer Dances are held to bring about plentiful crops. Among the Hopi, a Deer Dance is enacted as a ritual to bring rain. The Huichol Deer Dance is tied to the peyote—a vision- inducing cactus—used in their rituals. Deer is their brother, and their pilgrimages follow Deer's tracks across the land in a mythic "hunting" of the peyote. Indeed, it is believed that the plant grows wherever the Deer walks, so even the track of the Deer, embodied in the peyote, is considered holy: a road to the Otherworld.

As modern pilgrims, many contemporary authors have followed the Deer's path into the wilderness and come back with worthy tellings from the Forest of Tales. Continuing the tradition of deer magic and family relations gone bad, Robin McKinley's novel, *Deerskin* (a retelling of the Charles Perrault fairy tale, "Donkeyskin"), centers on the adventures of a princess who must flee her home when her own father tries to wed (and bed) her. In McKinley's novel, the distressed princess avoids sexual abuse at the hands of her father by fleeing into the forest, where she's given a magic garment of white deerskin by a mysterious woman. Using the enchanted skin, the princess makes a new life for herself in the forest where she both hunts and heals, becoming increasingly at home in the wilderness. Of course, she cannot remain there, and



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eventually she returns to society, casting aside the deerskin that has served so well as her protection.

Brother and Sister, by Ellen Steiber (a novella published in the anthology, *The Armless Maiden*), retells and recasts the Brother and Sister fairy tale as a contemporary fantasy about troubled teenagers. This is a powerful and moving retelling of this tale which retains many of the traditional elements (such as the boy's changing into a deer) but goes further into the story's mythic heart by deftly exploring the possibilities for healing inherent in acts of transformation, escape, and confrontation. Midori Snyder also draws upon the Brother and Sister fairy tale (along with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and various traditional folk ballads) in her coming-of-age novel *Soul String*. The novel follows the classic fairy tale theme of an arduous journey through the dark of the woods, but here the man transformed into a deer is a lover rather than a brother (a distinction often blurred in traditional tellings). Carolyn Dunn explores the Deer Woman legends of her Native American heritage in her recent collection of poetry, *Outfoxing Coyote*. In her visionary novel, *The Wood Wife*, Terri Windling evokes and reconfigures Otherworldly imagery from fairy tales (such as White Deer and Silvershod), Celtic myths of Cernunnos (the stag-headed lord of the hunt), and the myth of Actaeon to create her character the "Night Mage," who is trapped in the body of a white stag and whose hooves shed bits of turquoise where they strike against rock. Stag Man legends are also at the root of Patricia McKillip's early novel *Stepping from the Shadows* and her recent short story "Hunter's Moon"—both tales set in the modern world, where magic is as elusive and fleeting as the deer itself. The myth of Actaeon is brutally retold by Sara Maitland in "The Lady Artemis" (from her story collection *Angel Maker*), and is also at the heart of Kent Meyer's contemporary story "The Smell of Deer" *(The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror, Vol. 13)*.

In their truly wonder-filled, lusty, and post-modern novel, *The Fall of the Kings*, Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman deftly play with many now-familiar motifs of deer and stag lore: hunting and pursuit, the expression of desire, and the transformations that occur when animal nature is indulged and experienced. Their hero, Theron Campion, is worked upon by magic and begins to find his hidden nature emerging:

Theron was thinner than he had been, his cheeks gaunt, his eyes huge and liquid under bruised lids. He was dressed in brown and fawn, with a gold drop in his ear and a lovelock braided into hair, and he looked haunted, hunted, hungry as a stag before the snow releases the grass in springtime. The air was heavy with the smell of musk....Theron was indeed transformed. In the old days, in the North, it had been a complete transformation: bone, sinew, skin.

Now such transformations may seem merely metaphorical, but they are essential to the development of Theron's character. Basil, the man who effects this transformation, is delighted with his able magic, but is now disgusted with Theron's rank animality, sending him back to the wild, "where he must run until he tamed the beast within himself."

While for Theron the "wild" may be found within the unsavory taverns of a university town where the accepted bounds of sexual appetite are tested and abandoned, the "beast" is more than merely his exuberance: It is an inner sexual hunger that must be acknowledged and appeased if he is to develop as a leader. Basil's dream (in which Theron plays a key role) is to bring back the ancient days of the Land, when the kings *were* the Land, and the line between nature and civilization was not so keen. So here again we see that the way back into the First World is marked by the hoof prints of the deer and the ability to see, for a time, the world through its eyes.

Whether ancient myth, or modern mythic fiction, there is always desire and pursuit on the deer's path. These are aspects of Deer's sacred nature, a part of its song that even now is being sung in the night air of the desert,

Little one born in the night,
Caressed by the fresh wind
Where are you going then,
Flower fawn among the flowers?
Dressed in flowers, I am going.
(Evers and Molina)

And if we follow those tracks, into the night, into the winds and wild, whither then? ❧

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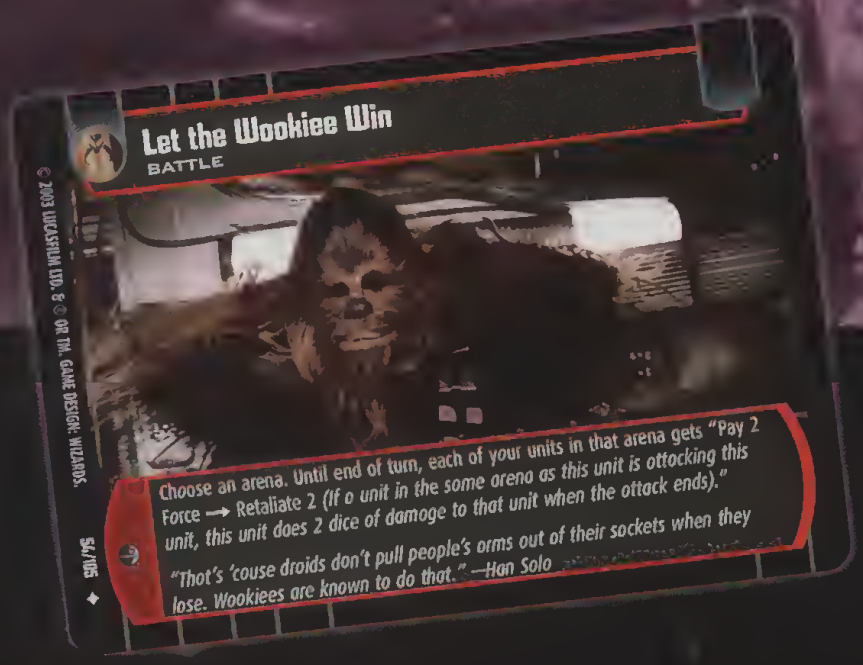
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By Emma Bull

Following time-traveler etiquette adds to your enjoyment of an event.

So you've come in search of opportunities for historical recreation, playacting, or just walking around dressed oddly. Are you sure you're prepared for your trip into the past? Have you brushed up on your travel manners and learned a little about the natives?

Every venue for historical recreation—Renaissance festivals, the Society for Creative Anachronism, living history museums, cowboy action shooting clubs, and the rest—has its own culture, created over years by the individuals and groups who've taken part. Not unlike a foreign country, really. So as your past lives travel agent, I recommend you visit the past as you would explore a new country: open-minded, ready for adventure, and aware of some of the local rules and customs. You'll come home with lots more than nice snapshots and a stomach full of deep-fried food.



All photos courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village/by Thomas Neill

Volunteers at Old Sturbridge Village are dressed in period costumes for a stroll in the gardens. They share their extensive knowledge with visitors to the living history museum.

Time-travel etiquette isn't all that different from making yourself a welcome guest anywhere. Be cheerful, say thank you, lend a hand if it's appropriate, eat what's put in front of you, and don't complain until you're back in the car with the windows rolled up. But there are a few things worth specific note that Miss Manners and Emily Post might not have covered. Use this information, and you'll have more fun—not to mention impressing the heck out of your traveling companions.

A little cultural background will help you interact with the locals. Let's start with Renaissance fairs, which are a weird world unto themselves.

Most medium- to large-size Renaissance fairs are owned and managed by corporations for profit. (There are exceptions, of course; some are run by Shakespeare festivals, universities, or as city events.) That means that the street performers, entertainers, food vendors, and support staff you see are employees, working stiffs.

And oh, they work hard. Working at a Renaissance fair is like running off to join the circus. From the outside, it looks as if it's all spangled leotards and applause, when in fact it's mostly hammering tent stakes and cleaning up after the elephants.

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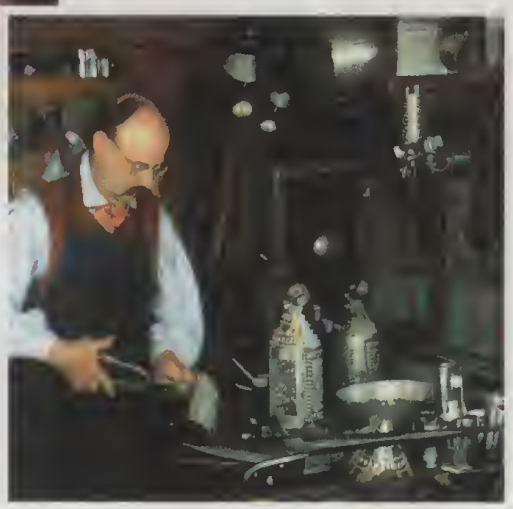
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ABOVE: Visitors to Old Sturbridge Village talk with a potter about the skills and materials needed to do his job. RIGHT: A Sturbridge volunteer makes a tin lantern using the materials and methods of early America.

Street performers usually begin their rookie year in training. After passing an audition, they attend classes for weeks, sometimes months, before the fair opens, learning to project their voices, master an accent, stay in character, and refine their act. Once the fair starts, they're there for cast call at 7 AM, and are on stage almost nonstop until cannon or trumpets or bells signal the fair's closing time as much as 12 hours later. Then, still in character, they help herd the patrons toward the gate and the parking lot.

All of the above must be why RenFair performers make the big bucks, right? Nope. Most first-year performers are unpaid. At many fairs, none of the performers are paid. They supply their own costumes, transportation, and any props, tools, or instruments they need for their act; they soldier on through heat, cold, rain, mud, and dust, for little or no money.

Are they crazy? Of course they are. But I'd say anybody who goes through all that to do what they love deserves some support. Even if they don't juggle as well as the Flying Karamazov Brothers ... yet.

So applaud, cheer, laugh; show these loons that they're making you happy. Respect their efforts and their performance times and spaces. Don't disrupt things by walking into their performing area, or talking through their songs or patter. Thank the stage performers after their shows, and tell them you had a good time.

Most of all, when performers pass the hat, put money in it. I know, you paid a bomb to get in the gate in the first place, and all the food costs twice what it ought to. But remember, this is the Renaissance, and the trickle-down theory of economics hasn't been invented yet. Besides, haven't you always wanted to be a patron of the arts?

You may never get to see a Renaissance festival from backstage and after hours. But a glimpse, even secondhand, may give you some insight into the folks whose guest you are. At the Minnesota Renaissance Festival, when the cannon went off at the end of the day, friends of mine would break out in a flood of forbidden speech. "Yamaha," they'd announce, without a trace of British Isles accent. "Buick Skylark. 401K. Led Zeppelin. Frozen burrito. Kodak." After a long hard day on site they needed to draw a clear line between the characters they played and their real selves. Rookies sometimes insisted on staying in character past cannon, but the old timers had a sure method for fixing that: Any hint of a "Prithee" out of you, and you got no beer at the after-hours tavern.

The Society for Creative Anachronism may share some of the costuming and archaic language of the RenFairs, but its culture is at the opposite end of the spectrum. It's a nonprofit group, and any SCA event is run by volunteers. This is a jaw-dropping accomplishment given the scope and magnificence of some of those events. Imagine 20 or so people inviting guests over for dinner—and madrigals, and dancing to live music, and games and stories, and that those guests number upward of 50 or 100, all in medieval costume.

As with any such enterprise, the trains don't always run on time. An SCA event isn't Medieval Times dinner theater, with every interaction scripted and choreographed, and courses served at twenty-minute intervals. But unlike at Medieval Times, or even the Renaissance fairs, you're not just a spectator. You're expected to come in costume, and the more authentic it is, the more thoroughly you've developed and researched your chosen medieval persona, and the more you contribute to the festivities, the more welcome a guest you are.

As time-traveling cultures go, the SCA is one of the more complex. Members are pretty tolerant of faux pas by newcomers, but don't be offended if someone takes you aside to explain any of the finer points of etiquette.

Titles and coats of arms, for instance: In the SCA, you can earn them by service to the Society or your local "kingdom," or by accomplishments in your chosen field of expertise. To appear at your first event declaring yourself to be a duke or duchess is a little, well, presumptuous. Attendees are generally addressed as "my lord" or "my lady" as a courtesy, but you'll earn extra credit if you introduce yourself as plain Master or Mistress.

SCA members tend to be fans of fantasy literature, but they also recognize that many of the things we love most in fantasy would have gotten you in big trouble in the Middle Ages. Witchcraft and wizardry, for instance. If you'd like to construct a magical character, try to do it in a historical context. Think John Dee rather than Gandalf, or a village herb woman instead of a powerful psychic sorceress. As one SCA member pointed out to me, "If I know you're a witch, I'm sort of obliged to burn you at the stake." You can also set your character in a time or place that was a bit more easygoing about supernatural matters.

Which reminds me: Still more extra credit will be yours if you choose to live your past life with the SCA in someplace other than Britain or western Europe. Africa, the Ottoman Empire, Russia, China—there's a lot more to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance than European knights and chivalry. Part of the point of the SCA is acquiring and sharing information about how people lived, and if you add a few unique tidbits to the mix, you'll be considered a welcome guest, indeed.

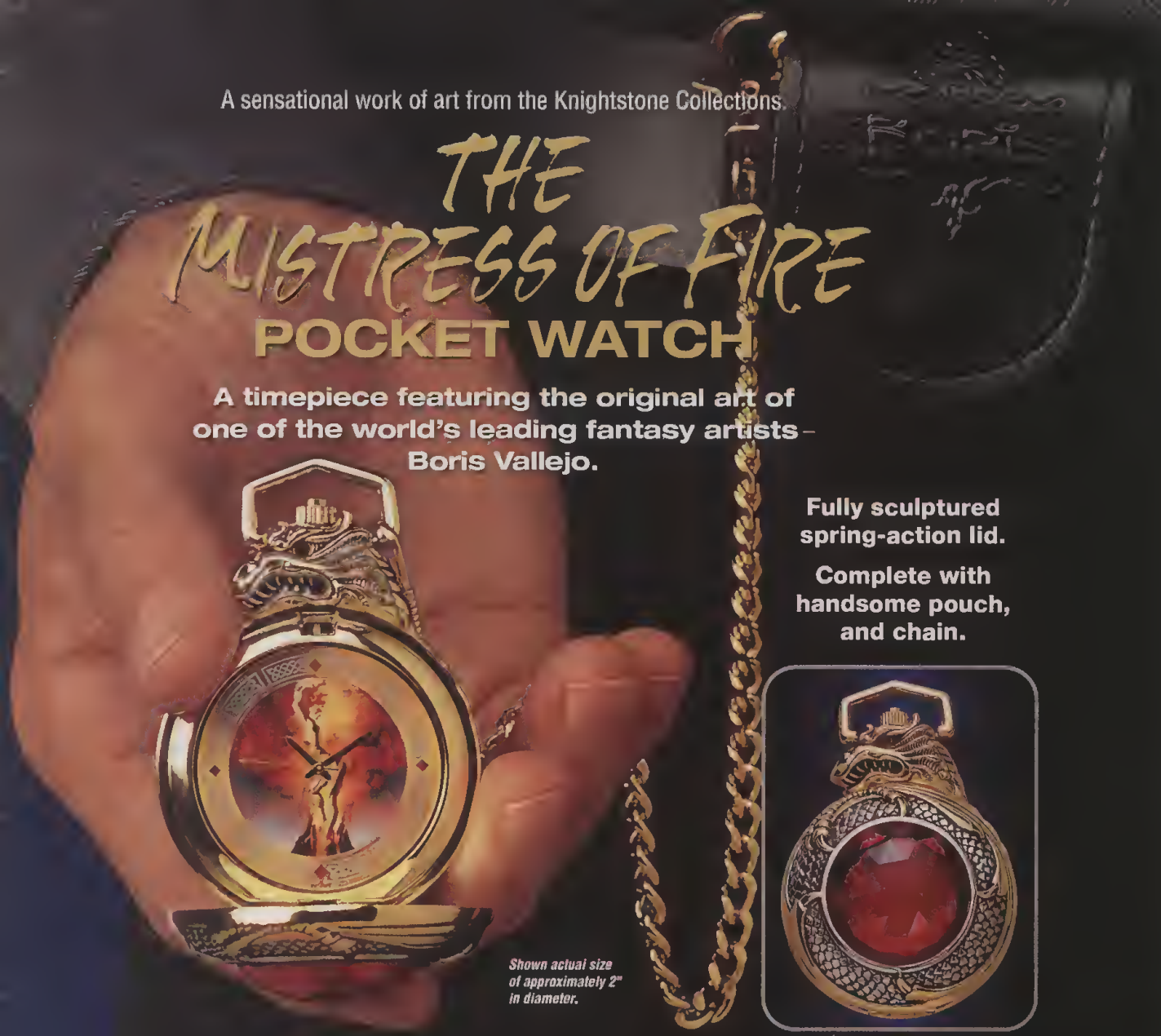
When I was in college, I helped start a campus SCA group. We got lots of assistance and encouragement from the nearest established barony, which was in Madison, Wisconsin, and as a thank-you gesture, we decided to hold a feast and invite them down for it. We got permission to hold it in the school dining hall, which had less medieval atmosphere than any building on campus—but it had a kitchen.

That settled, what were we going to feed

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our guests? Most of us didn't know how to cook, period, let alone cook something period-appropriate. We couldn't afford meat, and besides, we had vegetarians among both the hosts and the guests. Tomatoes were out: They were thought to be poisonous in most places during the Middle Ages. We settled on barley gruel with vegetables and Irish soda bread.

The gruel turned out every bit as awful as it sounds; we had gallons of it left over, and were eating it for weeks. Two of our guests got spectacularly, incapacitatingly drunk, made an embarrassing ruckus in the college quad, and had to be bedded down on someone's dorm room floor.

And we had a wonderful time. I think the folks from Madison did, too.

Living history museums hover between the corporate culture of the Renaissance fairs and the amateur-run, purely volunteer nature of the SCA. Their purpose is education, not profit, and the staff is mostly unpaid. But their dedication to authenticity and the detail with which they pursue it makes them anything but amateur.



ABOVE: A young visitor gets expert advice on growing corn from a well-informed Sturbridge volunteer.

Some of North America's best museums are living history ones. Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village spring to mind. They're also examples of the two general styles of living history. In Colonial Williamsburg, participants portray characters, and interact with visitors as if they were those people. In Old Sturbridge Village, the participants perform the kinds of work that would have been done by people in the village—farm wife, blacksmith, store clerk. But they speak to you not as a character but as themselves, with a 21st- century perspective on what they're doing.

Volunteers at either style of museum learn a staggering amount about the place and time they're representing. They often research and make their own costumes. And of course, they learn the skills their past selves knew, and practice them exactly as they would have been done—without power tools, electric light, or running water. Ask them anything about themselves, their work, their community, or their country. It's like striking up a conversation with a pioneer farmer or an 1800's storekeeper.

Because the learning curve is so demanding, it's hard to be a casual participant in living history museums. Unless there's a special event in which visitors are invited to come dressed in period clothes, it wouldn't be wise to arrive in costume. If your outfit isn't authentic, you'll be muddying the educational waters for other visitors. And if it is, your fellow visitors will expect you to know as much as the volunteers do.

That doesn't mean you can't be part of the fun—especially if you have a little warning beforehand.

Fort Snelling in Minneapolis sits on a bluff above the Mississippi River. It was built to mark and defend the line between the East and Indian Territory, and in its early days, the only way to get there was from the south up the Mississippi. I first visited on a sunny Saturday in July. That meant it was 98 degrees and nearly 100 percent humidity. I was wearing a tank top, cutoffs, and sandals. So when the nice young soldier in his canvas summer uniform looked up from the wheel he was repairing and asked, "You folks come up the river from Saint Louis?" all I could think was, "Yes, and I'm standing here in my underwear."

After that, though, I got the hang of it. The role-players, by staying in character, invited all of us to play along—in this case, to be visitors from back East, asking about the life of a soldier on the frontier.

At any variety of historical event, you'll be surrounded by spectacle—sometimes of the jaw-dropping variety. The most polite thing you can do when you see something especially beautiful or startling or otherwise impressive is react. This is no time to pretend you've seen it all. The people who've crafted the costumes, buildings, and ornaments love to be noticed and appreciated, so feel free to tell them you like their outfits.

Pick your moment, however. When the Queen is making a Royal Progress through the fair, surrounded by her court, it's not the best time to bounce up to her and say, "Wow, I like the embroidery on your sleeves." In fact, whenever you see a show in progress—which can be as simple as two peasants exchanging escalating, complex insults beside the path—don't intrude on their scene. Part of the pleasure of events like these is that any spot can become a stage, and theater can spring up right at your elbow. Be aware of it, and help maintain the mood.

It's tempting, in an environment like that, to jump in and perform yourself. Please do—if you're invited. But there are a limited number of places and times at any fair or event for performers to do shows, and they worked hard to get their spots. If you aren't asked in advance to sing or play or clown or juggle, enjoy being an audience member, and plan on asking someone later how to audition.

I'd like to mention a last, crucial etiquette topic that I'm sure Emily Post never mentioned: weapons. Daggers, swords, and six-guns are very cool costume accessories. But they're not welcome at all events in all locations, so do check before hanging that nice rapier at your hip. If it's legal and appropriate to wear weapons, go right ahead. Just don't draw them. If you're interested in historical accuracy, remember that the people who carried weapons didn't pull 'em out unless they intended to wreak varying degrees of havoc with them. Don't be surprised if the onsite security personnel assume the same thing about you.

Besides, your mother was right: you could put someone's eye out with that thing. To be safe, loop a thong or cord around the hilt of your blade to hold it in the scabbard, so it can't be casually drawn (like, say, by a curious kid in a crowd). You can use a similar loop around the hammer of a pistol to keep it in its holster. If someone asks to see your sword, check first to see if anyone's behind or beside you, then say, "Clear," loudly enough to be heard by someone a blade's length away or more. Then you can unsheathe it. Hand it over hilt first.

Good guests are invited back. You, as a good guest, will be made to feel especially welcome at whatever historical event you find yourself at. You may even be invited to take a larger part in the fun.

All you need now is an event to go to, right? We're getting to that. In my next column, I'll be suggesting plenty of them, in every category from "Well, of course" to "Is she serious?" Be ready to mark your calendar.

Oh, a parting apology: in the April column, the photo caption that claimed I was at a Regency ball was off by half a century. Ooops. As many of you savvy time travelers figured out, that was a Victorian event. (See? I do know the difference!) ❧

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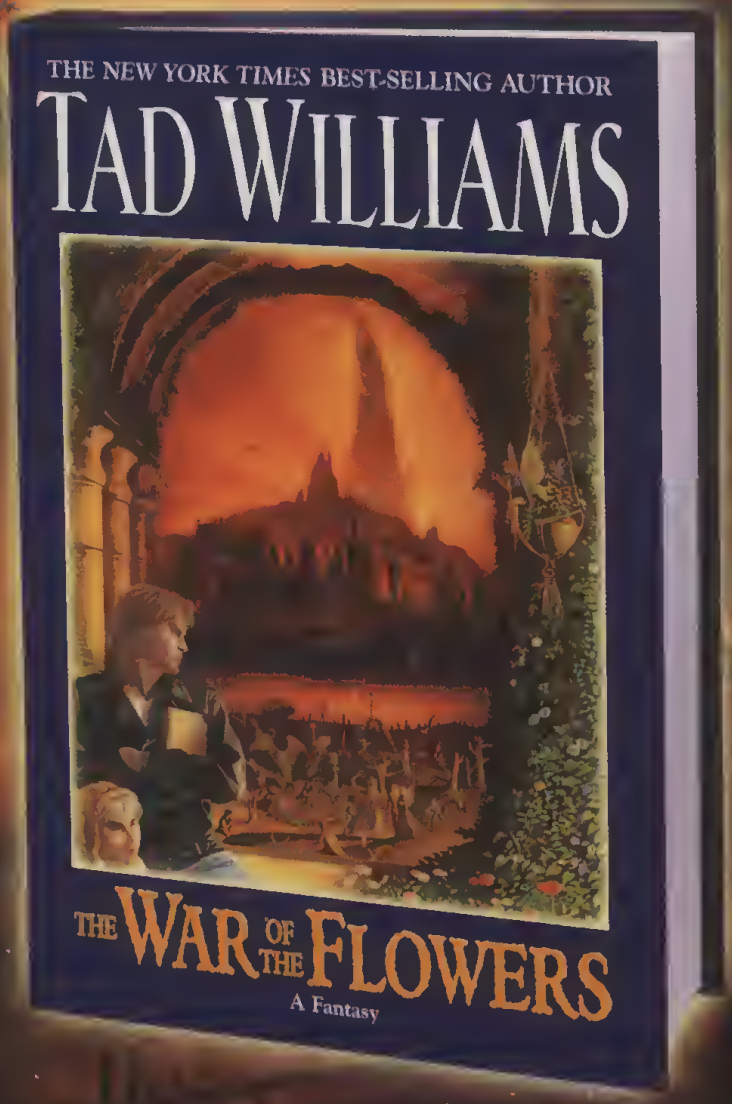




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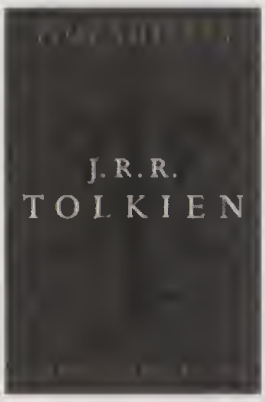
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By Gahan Wilson

Gain insights into the works of Tolkien and Lovecraft in two new books.



Back during the first Tolkien explosion, when the college students discovered him, his suddenly huge success and fame completely baffled and annoyed the bulk of the literary establishment. That establishment's then towering figures are now mostly dead and—to a degree I'm sure none of them would probably have thought credible—forgotten.

A small number of them, mostly fringe types, wrote books of a friendly nature for the lay public in order to explain Tolkien. I confess I found most of them merely so-so at the time, and suspect the bulk of them might be even less impressive now, but there was one volume among them that shone like an Elvish dagger gleaming amid Orcs. It was *The Road to Middle Earth* by a T.A. Shippey, and it struck me as being miles better than all the rest back then and has continued to impress me through years of brief dippings into and and even chapter-length browsings.



John Jude Palencar captured the spirit of H.P. Lovecraft in his cover painting for Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos, *edited by Robert M. Price.*

The wonderful news I bring to you is that the author, now calling himself Tom Shippey in his mellowing later years, has come out with a new book that is even better than the first one!

It's called ***J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century*** (Houghton Mifflin, NYC, hardcover, 347 pp., $26.00 ISBN 0-618127-64-X). It is fully as feisty as its title and proves conclusively that Shippey has thought deeply through the years between and has delved even more revealingly into his subject than before.

The book starts off with a thrilling—I do not use the word lightly!—defense of fantasy which I am sure that you, as a reader of a magazine specializing in the field, are very likely to enjoy immensely. I know that I felt bursts of glee surge through me as Shippey brilliantly made this or that telling point, and I freely confess that from time to time I chortled ecstatically and whacked the arm of my chair to at least partially express my delight at the deadly accuracy of one or another of his lethal thrusts at the opposition.

In spirit it is the kind of unrelenting broadsword attack that is favored by Aragorn, head chopping and all, and it goes after those critics who automatically, with a reflex as unconscious as a facial twitch, disdain any writings that contain elements of genuine fantasy and with righteous vigor compulsively trash all books or stories that in any way remind them of the fairy tales that stirred mythic wonder in their now cold and chilly breasts when they were children. This last trait in such critics, by the way, has long convinced me that such people have tragically confused maturation with a shriveling of spirit.

One way or another, the whole book advances this argument in a highly effective fashion, but that is by no means its only aim. It also delivers wonderful illuminations on how Tolkien's fantastic mind worked, how his high-placed academic environment both inspired and shaped him (Shippey, who actually occupied many of the exact same positions Tolkien held, profoundly understands that world) and, in all sorts of amazingly helpful ways, guides you expertly to a view of Middle-Earth along with its origins and implications that will, I guarantee it, vastly expand both your understanding and enjoyment of it.

Along these last lines you will find his suggestions on how to approach *The Simarillion* worth their weight in Dragon's jewels as you understand more and more deeply why he calls that chapter "The Work of His Heart?" Those who love the works and worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien but do not read this book will have seriously cheated themselves.

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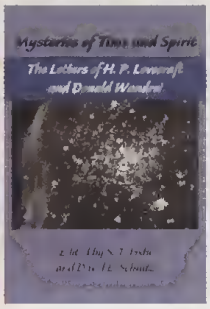
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I was recently enjoying the pleasure of being in the company of some extraordinarily good writers of spooky fantasy when a reference to Night Shade Books popped up. I wish the sudden and universal chorus of heartfelt approval that rose spontaneously from all present could have been heard by those who run that institution as it would have done their hearts good. The praise was well deserved; the books they turn out are of amazingly high quality both in their choices of authors and projects and by the way they are produced.

I am happy to announce they have come out with yet another beauty, ***Mysteries of Time and Spirit, The Letters of H.P. Lovecraft and Donald Wandrei*** (Night Shade Books, San Francisco & Portland, 439 pp., trade paperback, $20.00; hardcover $40.00, ISBN 1-892389-49-5), which has been lovingly garnered and arranged and very helpfully annotated by S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz and which anyone interested in either Lovecraft or the co-founder of the legendary Arkham House or both will find absolutely fascinating company.

The introduction and footnotes of *Mysteries* gives us all sorts of information that very helpfully orients and alerts the reader to the personalities, careers, and interactions of these two deeply eccentric friends. To give just one example, it points out that Wandrei's personal library differed





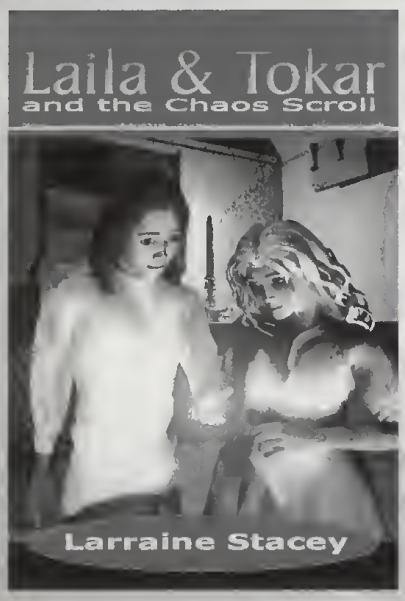
importantly from Lovecraft's by leaning heavily toward science fiction rather than classic fantasy and that it included oddities of which H.P.L. previously had not the slightest gleaming, such as the strange and fascinating exploratory books of Charles Fort. Therefore, it obviously had to have bent H.P.L.'s imaginings into all sorts of interesting new directions.

There are also endless little heart-warming bits that not only expand our understanding of H.P.L. and Wandrei, but bring them sometimes almost startlingly to life. For example, did you know that when Wandrei hitched a ride to Chicago and paid a visit to Farnsworth Wright, the cranky editor of *Weird Tales*, he conned the weird bastard by telling him an outright fib about how H.P.L. had just about decided that, since Wright had rejected his "Call of Cthulhu" (this part of the story is true if you can believe it!) he would sell the story to some other pulp as a first step in starting to broaden his choice of markets. Thus he spurred Farney into reconsidering his decision and buying "Cthulhu" after all. So whatever his little failing as time went on, we owe Mr. Wandrei an awful lot.

The letters are presented year by year in order of their writing and are beautifully and accessibly annotated with copious footnotes that expand not only on the letters themselves, but carefully describe and quote the doodles and afterthoughts the two wrote on their envelopes. The same is done concerning enclosures such as clippings from the *Providence Evening Bulletin* and candid camera snaps. Not only are the pictures on the fronts of their postcards described, but now and then the actual postmarks are given!

The book ends with a glossary of frequently mentioned names, an exhaustive bibliography of both men's written works, including dates of first publication, and an excellent index.

The book's title, *Mysteries of Time and Spirit,* is apt in the extreme, for the letters show us—sometimes with painful clarity—the transformations that took place in the psyches of these brilliant but insufficiently appreciated artists as they dealt with the triumphs, insults, and empty patches encountered during 11 years of struggle with their beloved work and with the world's treatment of it.



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Of course, with Lovecraft we are always conscious of the looming of his early death and the grotesque contrast between his fiction's pre- and postmortem success. Although his life is decidedly a doomish tale, it's also one of triumph, since H.P.L. not only never let his flag touch the ground so far as his art and its constant improvement was concerned, but he seemed well on his way to overcoming a multitude of personal demons and to breaking completely free from a huge complex of confining prejudices that his upbringing had foisted upon him. When his death did come at a sadly early age, his natural kindness and generosity of heart shone more clearly and brightly than they ever had before. Wandrei's letters tell a different, much sadder story. He did not deal anywhere near as well with the hard buffetings the world handed him. He was certainly game; there's plenty of evidence in these letters that he was still fighting hard up to and including the last one in this book, but we see him pulling back into a kind of carapace, settling for lower ground and, in spite of Lovecraft's delicate urgings to stay what started as a highly promising course, we and H.P.L. both helplessly watch him start to wander hither and yon (not for nothing did Lovecraft call him "Melmoth") amid growing indications he is losing his way. Neither of them led an easy life.

Once again the good folk at Ash Tree Press have persuaded a perfectly selected scholar to gather up and comment upon the works of one of the greats of fantasy in order that our lives may be seriously enriched.

This time it's ***Schalken the Painter and Others*** (Ash Tree Press, Ashcroft. B.C., hardcover; 245 pp., $46.00 US, ISBN 1-55310-042-5), the first of three anthologies that will bring together the entire weird short works of the great and seminal Irish author, J. Sheridan Le Fanu. Each collection will he assembled and commented upon by Jim Rockhill.

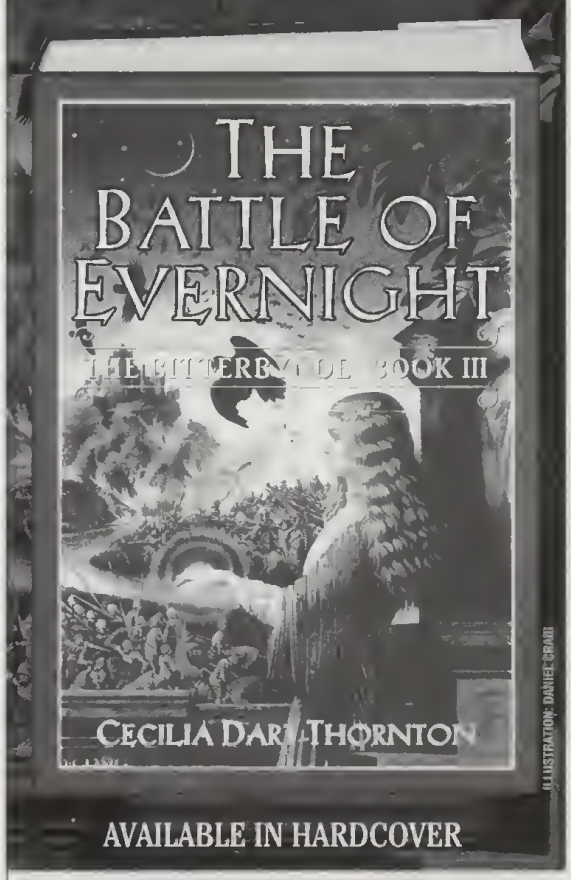
This, so far as I can recall, is my first exposure to Rockhill, but his introduction and the way he's laid out this first volume clearly shows he was well chosen for the job. The introduction is both full of stories new to me and expands very interestingly on many I have heard—for instance I knew Le Fanu believed his ailing wife when she announced she had been visited by the ghost of her father, but not that the genially smiling specter had gently assured her, "There is room in the vault for you, Little Sue," shortly before she died. And it expands very helpfully on aspects of the author's life such as the complex political history of his family and how enormously the dour and remarkably spooky speculations of Emanuel Swedenborg helped shape the structure and functioning of many of the ghastly visitations prowling in his tales.

The collection gathers together Le Fanu's

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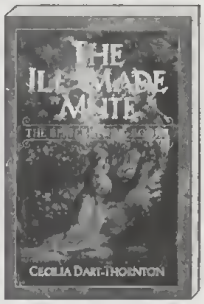
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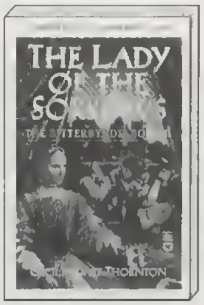
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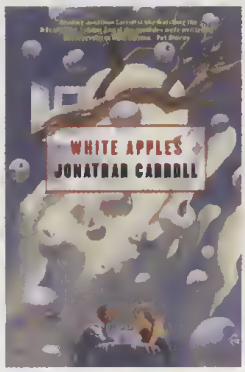
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earlier works (1814-1873) and is complete to the extent of publishing both versions of the gruesome "Schalken the Painter." It is a very well-presented book and will be gratefully received by any who are interested in a brilliant author who has inspired and continues to inspire so very much excellent writing.

Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos (edited with an introduction by Robert M. Price, preface by Robert Bloch; Del Rey Publications, NYC, trade paperback, 370 pages, $14.95, ISBN 0-345444-08-6) is a reissue of Price's first and probably best anthology (mostly because Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, and Fritz Leiber are dead) of work hugely influenced by the spooky stories Howard Phillips Lovecraft made up involving what H.P.L. called "Yog-Sothery," which is to say the tales that concern themselves with the monstrous doings of the monstrous beings spoken of in the pages of the monstrous *Necronomicon*, which he also made up.



Price's forward to the book was and still is a very much needed corrective to the accumulated mountain of righteous diatribes that have been launched against August Derleth, the co-founder and longtime director of Arkham House. He was the man primarily responsible for seeing to it that Lovecraft's work would not molder away and be forgotten in the pages of old pulps, but would have a new birth and gain the worldwide reputation and affection they presently enjoy. I, personally, can forgive him a number of warts and other disfigurements because of that.

Price is wise enough to admit that Derleth had his little failings—it was, for instance, just a tad tacky to dig up one-line notions from H.P.L.'s commonplace book, build them up into a short story, and label the thing a collaboration—but he stoutly defends him, and I think rightly, against those who, with an oddly righteous sort of certainty and rage, would rain thunderbolts down upon poor old Augie's dead head because he tried to sew the magic of the *Necronomicon* together with precepts in the actual old grimoires (elemental attributions and so on) and tended to view the problematic relationship between humanity and admittedly repellent extraterrestrials such as Cthulhu as a good and evil problem.

My own feeling is that there's not much of a technical problem in making the elemental notion work, if a little clunkily, but that Lovecraft was right in keeping such things foggy and Derleth wrong in trying to spell them out. So far as the good guy versus bad guy viewpoint's being concerned, "The Dunwich Horror" ends with a shoot-out, for Pete's sake, and even in his "The Mountains of Madness" Lovecraft is definitely pro one species and anti another.

Call me a crazy radical, hut my advice would be to pass on the serious fundamentalist theological approach and view the stories in this book as entertaining fiction. That way I think you'll enjoy them very much.

Gahan Wilson

White Apples, Jonathan Carroll, Tor, NY, hardcover, 304 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 0-765-30388-4.

In *White Apples*, Jonathan Carroll packs more mind-blowing wonders and whimsical delights into a single page than most writers manage in an entire book. And he does it in a story that repeatedly pulls the rug out from under his characters—and readers—with a zany aplomb reminiscent of Philip K. Dick at his most entertainingly subversive and surreal. If you're the kind of reader who requires solid ground beneath your feet, read no further. But if metaphysical love stories cum roller-coaster rides that go fireballing through time and space appeal to you even when they crash and burn, fasten your seat belts and read on.

Vincent Ettrich is a man who loves women. He loves them in the abstract, and he loves them in the particular. He loves everything about them, a lot. And he loves a lot of them. *White Apples* opens with Ettrich putting the moves on a lingerie saleswoman named Coco Hallis, and no doubt about it, the man is *good*. His seduction of Coco is a masterpiece of calculation and improvisation. But we soon realize that Ettrich is more than just another pick-up artist. He not only loves women, he *likes* them, which is a very different thing. Thus, women like Ettrich. And, somewhat to our surprise, so do we.

Carroll writes like a magician: He sets up audience expectations only to reverse them by means of sly misdirection or explode them through audacious trickery. This opening scene is but the first of many such reversals and explosions; the next follows swiftly when Coco, now Ettrich's lover, reveals to him that he died before they ever met, and that the instant he noticed her in the window of her shop was the same instant he returned to life ... or quasi-life, for, as a quick check reveals, he no longer has a pulse.

Turns out Coco is a guardian angel sent to protect the reborn Ettrich. Sent by whom, you ask? And to protect him from what? Hold on, because here's where things get *really* weird. Ettrich was brought back to life, in a neat inversion of Orpheus and Eurydice, by Isabelle Neukor, the love of his life, the woman for whom, just prior to his death, he left his wife and family ... only to have her run out on him. Nonetheless, Isabelle loves Ettrich with equal intensity, and she braves death itself to bring him back so that he can be a father to their as-yet-unborn son, Anjo, who happens to be the avatar of, well, God, or what passes for God in the universe of *White Apples*: an entity called the mosaic,

Laurell K. Hamilton Is Reading ...

And Be a Villain

Nice title isn't it? It's from Hamlet; "Meet it is I set it down, That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain...." The book is a Nero Wolfe mystery, one of over 60 written by Rex Stout. I thought I was doing pretty well to have 15 books on the shelves, but compared to Rex Stout I'm a slacker. Most series run out of steam around book five. From the first Nero Wolfe book, *Fer-de-Lance*, to the latest I'm reading, *In the Best Families*, the writing is clean, the plots are tight, and the characters are wonderful. Because Nero Wolfe is read not primarily for the joy of the puzzle, though that's fun, it's read for the interplay of characters. It is a joy to read about a professional detective who hates to work, does as little work as possible, will not let even murder detour him from his set schedule, considers food more important than anything but his orchids, and talks about how he's going to pay taxes this year and still keep his household going. He is the consummate eccentric, and yet because of his worries over money, taxes, and his own peculiarities, he seems more real than many more ordinary detectives. Of course, the ordinary man is Archie Goodwin, the wisecracking, proverbial detective. It is his voice that we hear. It is his observations that help us humanize Wolfe's intellect. Their obvious friendship as they trade insults makes us want to come back again. We can visit the brownstone on West 35th Street any time we want. We can listen to Archie trying to cajole Wolfe to work before the bank account is empty. He once went so far as to entice Wolfe onto a case in which he framed himself for murder. That's devotion, or insanity. Or maybe it is the unquestionable faith in the talents of a certain very large, orchid-loving detective. Archie's faith has been shaken on occasion, but never let down. It is that reliability, between all the characters—Saul Panzer, Lt. Cramer, Fritz Brenner, Lily Rowan, and so many others we see only every few books— that makes us want to come back. Because we know that with few exceptions there will always be someone there to answer the phone, gourmet food to be served, orchids to be admired, and crimes to be solved. ❧

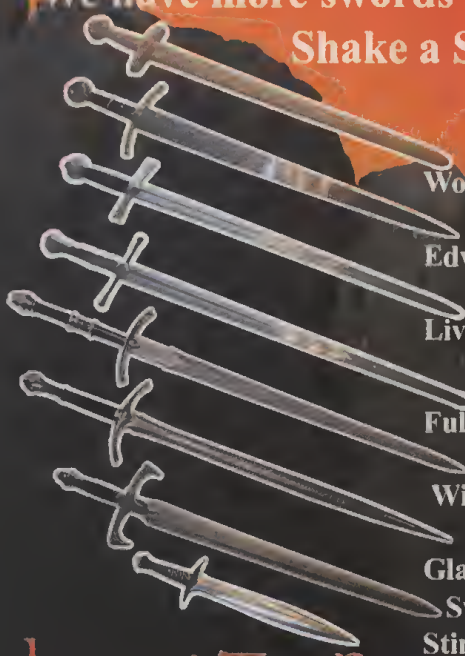
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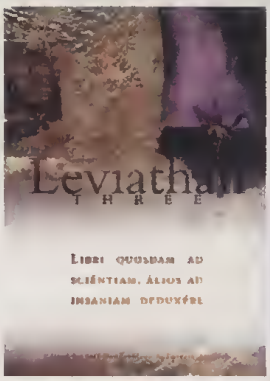
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which is made up of the sum total of the experiences of everyone and everything that's ever existed—the ultimate work in progress. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, what next?

Anjo is all but omnipotent, that is ... as long as he's a fetus. Once born, he will forget his origin, his mission, his powers. That's why he needs Ettrich, who, as a revenant, possesses knowledge and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Ettrich can remind him of his purpose: to stop a part of the mosaic that's developed an independent consciousness and begun to interfere with the proper working of the universe. This is chaos, a k a entropy (symbolized in the white apples of the title), which meanwhile has dispatched malevolent agents to ensure that Ettrich won't be able to teach the newborn Anjo anything.

Driven by this loopy metaphysics, Carroll's narrative progresses by means of the associative and intuitive logic peculiar to dreams and acid trips. As events get more and more surreal, further removed from physical causality, Carroll increasingly relies on the personal magnetism of his characters and the eccentric charm of his writing to keep his story from disintegrating and his readers from hurling the book across the room. Fortunately, Ettrich and Isabelle are engaging, sympathetic characters ... which might be Carroll's greatest magic trick of all, considering that they're the kind of lovers I usually find even more annoying in fiction than in real life, love junkies whose relentless romanticizing of their relationship has rendered it a religious cult with a membership of two. Somehow, though, Carroll actually made me care about them even when I didn't buy their actions or motivations, which began to happen with regularity about two-thirds of the way through the novel. Carroll seems to have recognized this difficulty himself, as from that point on he labors mightily to bring his meteoric novel gently down to earth. Instead, it crashes in a clumsy *deus ex machina*. Yet the failure of the ending is almost irrelevant; *White Apples* is a journey, not a destination. For a wild ride like this one, I will follow Mr. Carroll wherever he cares to go.





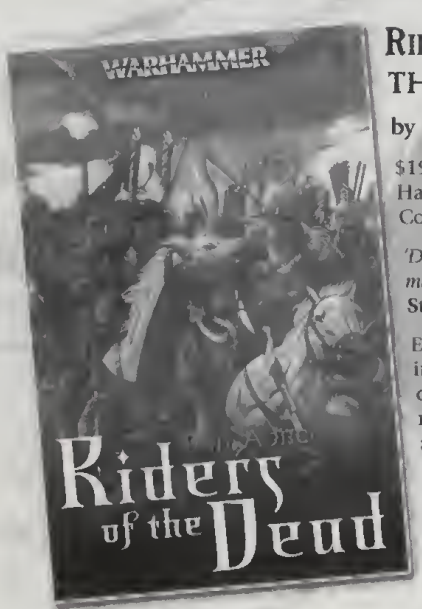
Leviathan 3 (Ministry of Whimsy Press, FL, trade paperback, 468 pp., $21.95, ISBN 1-894815-42-4).

Speaking of wild rides, there are more than a few in *Leviathan 3,* the latest in a continuing series of fantasy anthologies edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre. Like its predecessors, this volume contains (mostly) original fiction by some of the best writers working in and on the outskirts of the fantasy genre today, including Zoran Zivkovic, Stepan Chapman, Michael Moorcock, Jeffrey Ford, Michael Cisco, and Carol Emshwiller. The tone is unapologetically literary, at times even experimental, but this shouldn't put potential readers off; *Leviathan 3* contains some of the best short fiction I have read this year in any genre, period. Two of the stories in particular, Chapman's "State Secrets of Aphasia" and Ford's "The Weight of Words," are exceptionally fine and should be considered strong contenders for best-of-the-year anthologies and awards.

Chapman, whose novel *The Troika* won the Philip K. Dick award in 1998, is a stunningly inventive writer. Here, with a nod to Edward Lear and a tip of the hat to Lewis Carroll, he sets forth the desperate struggle of Empress Alba of the ectoids—"weightless luminous stick figures who built on vapor, slept on fog, and lived in architectural drawings"—against the Black Glacier, a mysterious and malevolent entity that is spreading like a swiftly metastasizing cancer throughout the kingdom

Continued on page 78

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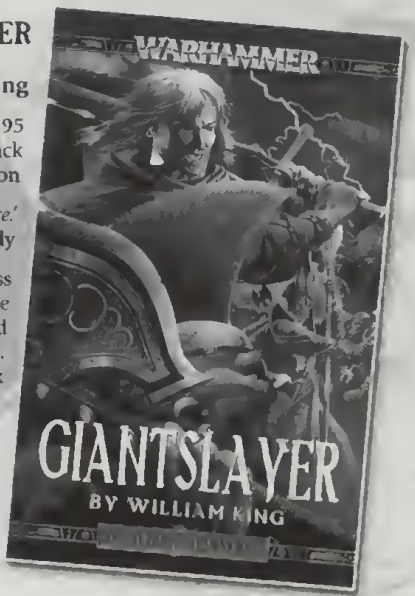
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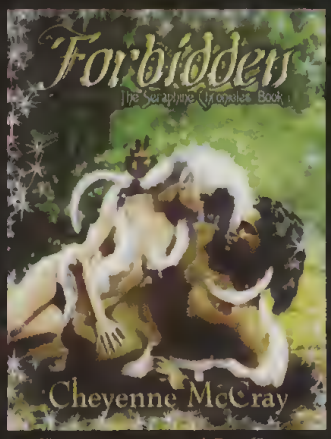


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SEEDS-FOR-BRAINS

SOME CREATURES DO EVIL BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO CHOICE, BUT THE REAL MONSTERS ARE THE ONES WHO THINK IT OVER.

BY DAVID BARR KIRTLEY

ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT GOTO

The ancient Greeks believed that the heart—the center of the human body—was also the center of consciousness. Most people nowadays believe that the *brain* is the seat of our thoughts, holding as it does our personality and all our memories, and those people are right. But the ancient Greeks we e right too, in a way. Some residual awareness of self does reside in our hearts—an immortal soul, if you will. I know this for a fact.

All this, I'm afraid, is a rather long-winded way of trying to explain why I could still move, and think, and feel, when I awoke from death on that chill October evening in 1789, without a head.

The first thing I noticed was darkness. Then wet dirt pressing me down. Panicked, I clawed my way from a shallow grave. My burial must have been perfunctory; they hadn't put me down very far, maybe two or three feet. Six feet is customary, you know.

But even once I was free of the clinging earth, there was still darkness. I crawled through dry grass, which I could feel brushing against my bare palms. I could feel the breeze and the great void of open sky above me, but still this absolute blackness oppressed me. I thought something must be wrong with my eyes, so I reached up to feel for them, and accidentally jammed my fingers together in that empty space atop my shoulders.

Then I felt carefully around my collar bone. The skin ended an inch or so up my neck, torn roughly away. Nothing but a gaping hole there, and down inside my throat the flesh was spongy. Abruptly I drew my hand away.

I was headless.

So of course I couldn't see. I had no eyes. I climbed to my feet—in fact, it was easier to balance without a head. I took a few halting steps and immediately slammed into the rough trunk of a tree. As I rebounded, my knees struck against the smooth, solid face of what could only be a tombstone, and I toppled over it. Fortunately I didn't hit my head. Being headless had some advantages.

But still, if I was going to get anywhere I would clearly need to find my head. Or at least *a* head. Anything with eyes would do. That presented a definite problem though. People don't just leave spare heads lying around.

I CRAWLED ALONG THE GROUND, FEELING MY WAY WITH my fingers. I clambered over a jagged wall of piled rock. At last I began to move across lumpy furrows of dry dirt; I was in some farmer's field. My first thought was dread, that I was wandering far from civilization and would soon be lost in a dark wood, where I would certainly perish.

My second thought was a bit more reasoned. Civilization was the last thing I wanted to encounter in my present condition, since "civilized" people would likely run screaming from me. Furthermore, I had *already* perished, and was missing my head besides, and so I should hardly fear anything that the woods could threaten—squirrels, owls, maybe a fox.

So deeper into that field I went. I wandered into a patch of growing things, crops of some kind—dry, winding vines; leafy. And scattered among them were heavy, bulbous spheres, large as a man's head.

Pumpkins! Large as a man's head ...

I pulled one from its nestled resting place, tugging hard to snap it free from the greedy, grasping vine. Then I placed the vegetable orb atop my shoulders.

You've never had a pumpkin for a head, have you?

No, I didn't think so.

It's an odd sensation. Think about when you make a jack-o-lantern. You take a large knife and cut deep into the pumpkin's flat-topped dome, wrenching the blade back and forth as you carve a jagged circle—one clumsy slice after another. Then you seize the stump of stem at its base and you tug. With a great crack the whole thing comes loose, pulling with it—

A stringy mess of orange pulp and hard, white seeds. Then you reach down into the pumpkin, with your bare hands, and pull out great handfuls of the stuff. It makes kind of a popping, tearing sound as it comes free. Your hands are wet and dripping—you have to wipe them off, but no matter how much you wipe, your skin is still sticky and tingly. You make a pile of all those pumpkin innards. You look at it and think it's gross.

Well *that's* what was inside my head: all those seeds and that gummy orange pumpkin flesh. It was a poor excuse for a brain. Those little seeds, like grits in oatmeal; I couldn't think straight. And the thing had no eyes anyway, so I still couldn't see. I took that pumpkin head and hurled it away into the night and heard it shatter across the furrows with a satisfying *splat.*

I don't know how long I wandered in darkness. Those looping vines seemed to stretch deliberately to snag at my ankles. Again and again I stumbled. Finally I fell against the chest of a man, caught myself on his shoulders.

Pardon me, sir, I said—or tried to say, but then realized I had no mouth either. I was sure the man would flee in terror, but he just stood there, stock still ... unnaturally still. Perfectly rigid. His arms were stretched out in either direction, stiff and horizontal. Pleadingly I groped for his hand, but when I found the cuff of his shirt, it was stuffed with straw. He was only a scarecrow.

That was a little embarrassing.

Only a scarecrow, but still tall and proud, guarding over his fields with watchful eyes. Eyes! He hung there, bound like our Savior on a wooden cross, and this scarecrow too was *my* savior, because as I groped my way up his torn wool shirt I found it. His head. A fresh ripe autumn pumpkin, with a carved face.

I ripped away the shirt and the straw and that ridiculous hat they'd put on him, and gently worked the pumpkin free. Then, with a rush of excitement hordering on ecstasy, I placed it atop my own shoulders.

I could see! Not well—everything was dim and gray and hazy, but nonetheless I could see. I looked out over the fields, and the trees, and the stone walls, and the churchyard, and the steeple, and the houses of that small village. I danced a jig under the wonderful white light of the looming gibbous moon. The inside of the pumpkin had been scraped clean—blessedly empty of seeds and gunk. I still had no brain, no memories of who I had been, but nevertheless it was a tremendous improvement.

A teensy triangle was carved between my eyes, and through it all the smells of the night came darting in—cold air, and dry leaves, and pumpkins—pumpkins everywhere. I was grinning, I couldn't stop. I mean really, I couldn't. My mouth was just carved that way, but what did it matter? Why would I want to do anything but grin? I had a head. I could see and smell and...speak? Yes. I sang a little tune off the top of my head.

Off the top of *my* head. It felt good.

I stole through the outskirts of the village, crouching in the shadows of cottages. Then a spot of brightness caught my eye: one lonely candle glowing warm and orange, seen through the frosted kitchen window of a tall mansion. That gave me an idea.

I padded closer, eased open the back door, and crept inside. It was dim in that old house. With my murky vision, all I could make out was the candle flame itself, beckoning to me like a distant beacon. I felt my way down a narrow hall, up a few shallow stairs, and through a doorway into the kitchen. I crossed the room furtively and laid hold of the candle. I pried the dome off my pumpkin head and planted the candle down inside, pushing hard to make sure the hot wax stuck. Flame filled me with a pleasantly warm burn, and lit my empty eyes with flickering light. I could see much better now!

But then I saw...uh oh.

I was not alone. A young couple sat at a table in the corner. I had interrupted their intimate conversation. The young lady was pleasantly plump, with a lovely pale heart-shaped face—currently frozen in shock. The young man was dark-haired, broad-shouldered, and tall. Together, their wide eyes stared at me, tinged gold in the reflected light of my fiery gaze.

"Um ... pardon me," I mumbled. "I was just looking ... I don't suppose you've seen my head?"

The young lady practically screamed *her* head off.

"Devil!" The young man seized a hardwood cane that lay on a nearby counter, and charged me, swinging. His violent blow was forceful enough to splinter my neck (if I had one). As it was, the cane whistled through the empty air between my shoulders and my pumpkin head. The momentum carried the young man around in a circle, and with a massive crash he plowed into a bureau.

I ran.

There was a modest carriage house adjoining the mansion, and a fierce night-black stallion was tethered there. I yanked him from his stall and leapt onto his bare back. My head didn't know how to ride a horse, but my body remembered; I knew it in my *heart.* As I hurst from the stable, the young man came chasing after, cane in hand.

I galloped through the moonlit streets of that sleepy village, and behind me the young man screamed bloody murder. People emerged from lighted doorways to watch me pass. "Stop him!" The young man's



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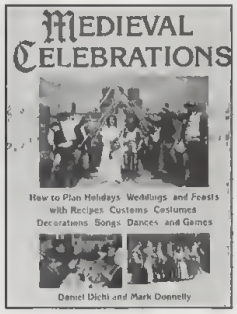
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angry voice swept along in my wake. "That horseman, stop him!"

"He has no *head*!" a woman shrieked.

Then I was out beyond the streets and into the shadowy forest. I kept on at a canter until I was certain there was no pursuit, then I tied my newly acquired horse to a tree. I sat down on a fallen log and hung my pumpkin head-in my hands.

Oh, the way those people had looked at me! I was a monster to them. A freak. A devil. I had been so proud of my ingenuity, of my candlelit jack-o-lantern eyes and nose and mouth. But now those all seemed so pathetic. Only a *real* head would do. Only with my own head back could I walk through town respected, with my ... *head* held high.

But how would I ever find it? Usually when you've lost something, the best thing to do is try to remember when you last saw it. But that wouldn't help me, because I couldn't remember *anything*. I didn't know how my head had become separated, or when, or where I would have to enlist the aid of someone more knowledgeable, perhaps some local historian.

I spent a few nights moping about in the woods, trying to work up the nerve to brave the village once more. Finally I stole back under cover of dusk. My candle, the acquisition of which had caused me so much trouble, had burned out after only a few hours. So the first thing I did was swipe a few spares, not to mention a tinderbox, from the porch of an old lady. Then, eyes aglow, I set my sights on the schoolhouse. I reasoned that if anyone here would be familiar with local lore, it would be the neighborhood schoolmaster.

Fortunately for me, he was alone. I lingered in the doorway and watched him correct papers. He was incredibly tall and lanky, with a pendulous head and aquiline nose. He looked up. "Ah," he remarked, in a bored tone of voice. "You must be that Headless Horseman everyone's been talking about. Looking for your head, I hear?"

"YOU'VE NEVER HAD A PUMPKIN FOR A HEAD, HAVE YOU? NO, I DIDN'T THINK SO."

"Yes," I whispered, drawing closer, and then, "aren't you afraid?"

He chuckled, and patted a fat black tome that lay on the desk by his side, *A History of New England Witchcraft*. "I'm an educated man, not some local bumpkin. I'm conversant in various manifestations of the supernatural. Now, on to the matter of your head." He smiled slyly. "I'm prepared to use the full breadth of my erudition to help you reclaim what is yours, but in return you must agree to do something for me."

"Yes," I promised. "Anything. Just get me back my head." I couldn't believe my good fortune. "It's really out there? You can really find it?"

He nodded. "Oh yes, it's out there. It will have been preserved—fortified by the same dark and mysterious powers that have suffused your body." He rose and paced around me in a slow circle, scrutinizing my vestments with a cold and focused gaze. "You were a Hessian soldier."

I looked down at my tattered coat and shirt and pants. They were grungy and caked with graveyard dirt. I hadn't paid much attention to them, having been singularly focused on securing myself a head. Even now, studying them, they told me nothing. But somehow this man of letters had seen a piece of my missing past in the clothes. I explained, "I don't know who I was."

No, of course not." He sniffed. "Not without your head. Nice pumpkin, by the way."

"Thank you."

He frowned, an expression of deep concentration falling over his face. He strode to the bookcase and briskly pulled one volume from the shelf. He licked a finger, then flipped through the pages. "It seems I read an account once of a Hessian soldier who lost his head in battle. During the War for Independence. Ah yes, here it is." He paused. "Your head was taken off by a cannonball."

By a cannonball! A cruel sphere of heavy iron had torn my head from my shoulders. How awful. I would have gulped heavily, if I'd had a throat. "But where did it end up?"

"That, pumpkin-head," he said, slamming the book shut, "is what we must discover."

He set to work immediately, consulting books and maps and letters. I watched with a kind of wonder. Since I lacked a real head, I possessed only the most rudimentary cognitive facilities, but this man! Oh, his mind! It was sharp as a saber, complex as a clock. Even when he sat totally motionless, lost in perfect concentration, still I could see that his mind was all awhirl, endlessly processing, collating, refining, and concluding. I hoped desperately that my own head was even one-tenth as clever as his.

"How's it going?" I asked him. "What are you finding out?"

He turned his attention from book to book to book. "I don't know if I should bother to elucidate. It's all probably beyond your comprehension anyway. Just let me handle it. Tell you what, why don't you go outside and toss your head around for a while? I work faster without distractions."

"All right," I said cheerfully.

I tried tossing my head around, like he said, but as soon as the pumpkin got too far from my shoulders, I lost the use of its eyes, which made it hard to catch it again. Fortunately I didn't splatter it. After a while I gave up on that and instead sat down on a rock to think, while I doodled in the dirt with a twig.

I knew now that I had been soldier. Not such a bad thing to be, all things considered. Honor and valor, bright uniforms and shiny medals, cavalry charges, and all that; the invigorating, fiery smell of gunsmoke drifting across the battlefield. And wartime experiences always made the best stories. I imagined that my head, once I found it, must be full of fascinating recollections.

The schoolmaster and I spent the next few evenings trudging around town, exploring various fields by lantern light. I wasn't exactly sure what we were looking for, and he didn't seem overly interested in enlightening me. He simply led the way, and I followed along behind, laden with boxes and books and surveying equipment.

"Hey, seeds-for-brains," he barked. "Hurry up, would you? We haven't got all night."

"Sorry," I said. With all the materials piled in my arms, I could barely see where I was going.

"We're doing well," he said. "Certainly better than you were doing on your own. I heard you were looking for your head inside a *house*. What were you thinking?"

I remembered the young couple I'd encountered that first night. I wanted to explain to him that I'd gone into the house to get a *candle*, and that once I saw those two, the thing about my head just kind of slipped out. I was still trying to put that sentiment into words when he continued, cutting me off. "You know that girl you saw?

Continued on page 82

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THE MAN Who Did NOTHING

By Karen Traviss Illustration by Michael Gibbs

"All that is necessary for EVIL to triumph is that GOOD men do nothing."

Hursley Rise, May 2

There was a boy—five, maybe six—sitting on half a discarded mattress by the curb as Jeff drove down the road. At first he thought the child was trying to open a bottle of pop, but the closer he got, the better he could see that the boy was making a petrol bomb.

Jeff slowed to a crawl and then stopped. He didn't dare switch the engine off, not here. A daffodil nodded in the grass at the side of the road and the whine of a power drill competed intermittently with music throbbing from an open window. The normality didn't reassure him; he opened the car window about six inches.

The child was trying to thread some rags into the neck of a beer bottle, pausing every so often to hold the bottle up to the light, sigh, and resume his task of working the rag into the neck of the bottle with his index finger.

For a moment Jeff thought about getting out and taking the thing from him. Then an older boy in the latest Manchester United tracksuit walked up to the kid and crouched over him, like a protective elder brother, and took the bottle gently from him. He examined the wick, pushed it farther into the bottle, and handed it back to the kid.

That was how you did it. Then both boys looked up at Jeff, as if moving as one.

"Antichrist! Fuckin' antichrist!" they shouted. And the bottle—unlit, mercifully—arced and crashed onto the road just short of the driver's door. Both boys ran back up the road, not looking back.

Jeff could have—should have—taken the lethal little toy from the kid. He should have marched him back to his own front door and berated his mother for letting such a tiny child handle potential destruction. He should have done something.

But he didn't. It was Hursley Rise, and these were dangerous times, and the shabby little housing estate was going mad. He accelerated toward the city center.

Hursley Rise citizens' drop-in center, nine days earlier.

"I don't see why he should be living next door to me," said the woman in the interview booth. She smelled of chip fat and Issey Miyake perfume; in the small plaster-boarded space the combination was distracting. "He's the Antichrist. Can't you do something about it? Get him moved or something?"

It wasn't an unusual request to make of your ward councilor. Since Jeff Blake had started holding evening surgeries at the community center, he had seen two constituents complaining about military radar upsetting their racing pigeons, and a man who had lined his loft with cooking foil to stop military intelligence from beaming messages into his home. He had wanted an improvement grant to pay for lead sheet, just to be on the safe side.

"How do you know he's the Antichrist, Mrs. Avery?" Jeff asked. He caught the inside of his cheek discreetly between his teeth to stifle a laugh. You couldn't mock a voter a week before an election. "I mean, we can't just go in and evict the bloke like that. The courts will want some grounds for action."

"He's evil. Pure evil."

"Well, lots of people aren't very lovable, Mrs. Avery. It doesn't make them the devil."

"Since he moved in there's been nothing but trouble in our road. He's a weird old sod. Lives on his own. The kids are terrified of him."

"Yes, but why do you think he's the Antichrist?" She looked at him for a brief, blank moment, as if the word had thrown her. Then she puffed a sigh and began rummaging in her bag. While her head was tilted down, he could see the darker roots in her red spiky hair. A packet of low-tar cigarettes and the latest, tiniest, slimmest mobile phone clattered onto the melamine table while she excavated.

"There," she said at last. And she handed him a creased strip of newspaper.

The headline was from one of the tabloids: ANTICHRIST WILL APPEAR ON COUNCIL ESTATE, WARNS RECLUSE. The story reported the ramblings of a man who predicted the new millennium would see the arrival of the Beast in a humble home. The man, said the story, had no electricity, phone, or water supply but kept track of world events by communing with the cosmic consciousness on his allotment. He claimed the Antichrist would be identified by the trail of havoc he left behind him.

Jeff handed the cutting back to Mrs. Avery. "I thought it was 666," he said.

"What is?"

"The identifying mark of Satan."

Mrs. Avery scowled. She had one of those flat, hard little faces with thin lips and a broad nose, the prevailing type on the estate. Inbred, he decided, whining and helpless; it wasn't a view he would voice, not even to his wife Bev. He wished secretly for the working class of his dad's generation, skilled manual workers with scrubbed front doorsteps, all neat, proud poverty and a horror of hire purchase.

"You'll laugh out the other side of your bleedin' face when he starts," she said. She stood and slung her bag over her shoulder. "And don't expect me to vote for you, neither. I'm coming back with a petition."

Hers was just one vote. He had a seven thousand majority here, even if the party was holding on to overall control of the council by just one seat. And, as leader, he was assured a safe one. He watched her departing back with no regrets. "Silly cow," he said to himself.

He gathered up his papers to go home. He was on time. He wouldn't have to grab a takeaway as a peace offering to a huffy Bev, silently angry after yet another dinner left to congeal in the oven on a low heat.

While he was fumbling in his briefcase for his car keys, his phone warbled. He put the case on the roof of the car and took the phone—clunkier, older, less desirable than mad Mrs. Avery's chic device—from his jacket.

"Jeff Blake."

"Jeff, it's Warren. We've got a bit of a problem."

"Christ, when haven't we?" He could hear bar sounds in the background. "Are you in the staff club?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you were supposed to be out canvassing for Graham. Some poxy deputy you are—"

"Well, this is *about* Graham." Rustling noises and a sudden drop in the background noise suggested Warren had moved somewhere secluded. "He's in a spot of trouble."

"What now? Drunk driving?"

"Computer porn. Accessed using the council network."

"Who knows about it?"

"Only a few people. IT staff, internal audit, and the chief executive."

"OK. First thing in the morning, I want you and him in my office. First thing, mind. I want it sorted."

Jeff got in the car and sat for a few minutes in despairing silence before turning the key and moving off. A slithering noise above his head followed by a dull thud made him hit the brakes. He looked in the rearview mirror: his briefcase, split open by the fall from the car roof, was scattering papers to the breeze.

"Oh, bollocks," he said. And Mrs. Avery's Antichrist seemed like an easier problem to deal with right then.

"This isn't the Middle Ages.

Memo
To: Head of Housing Service
From: Hursley Area Housing Manager
Re: 15 Barton Crescent
We have had six more complaints from tenants today asking us to evict Michael Warburton of 15 Barton Crescent on the basis that he is the Antichrist. We have also had a similar complaint from an owner-occupier in Waverley Gardens about Frank James Morton of Flat 35. My staff have explained we have no power to evict if there is no breach of the tenancy agreement, and that they can't both be the Antichrist. I know these people have unusual views but we are aware there is talk of "doing the job" themselves. I would appreciate some support and advice on the situation before it boils over.

There was a Victorian oil painting of a former lord mayor hanging in the corridor leading to Jeff's office at the town hall. It always bothered him. As he walked closer, he could see a grotesque, round-faced figure with cartoon-like circular eyes, and as he drew level with it the face resolved into grim patriarchal realism. He knew it was just the light playing on the swirls and textures of the oil paint. But these days all things seemed sinister, imbued with darker meaning.

Graham Vance was already sitting in the office looking for all the world like a schoolboy in need of a good slap. His face seemed as if the years had been put on it by a makeup artist, creped and puffed and grayed on top of youth, as if he could be restored to his boyish prettiness by just peeling it all off.

Go on, cower, you little shit, Jeff thought. *I'll teach you to risk this party's majority.* He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his desk.

"Why the hell did you do this through the council network? You know it's monitored."

Graham shrugged. "So what have I done?"

"Downloading child porn."

"No way."

"You've e-mailed pictures to all your noncey mates, too. Don't lie to me."

Vance looked slightly thrown. He pulled a dismissive face. "It's a private matter. And it was just pictures, only teenagers. It's not as if I've been caught with a little kid, is it?"

"I don't believe what I'm hearing. You make me sick."

"Prove I've done something illegal."

"Someone probably could, but what worries me most is what it looks like to the voters." Jeff glanced down the printout on his desk: line after line, thousands of them, of www's and .coms and incomprehensible things—except for words like *ripe schoolgirls* and *Toilet Boy.* "You're on one of the Social Services subcommittees. What are you going to do?"

"Do I have to do anything?"

"I'd suggest you resign but it's too close to the election and we'd have to explain you away to the media."

Graham didn't appear contrite. "Fuss about bugger all, really."

"Really? Like the drunk driving, and the prostitute on the civic trip to France?"

"It's pretty harmless stuff. Nothing extreme."

"I wouldn't know, and I'm not much inclined to look at it, either. That's Audit's job. You're a disaster waiting to happen for this party." Jeff gave up trying to stare him into an apology and leaned back in his chair. "After the election, if we get back in—if you get back in—"

"You need my seat to keep overall control of this council," Graham said. "You want the opposition to walk in? This is dirty washing we can do in private." He paused. "You can talk the chief exec out of taking this to the Standards Committee, can't you?"

"Can't promise," Jeff said, hearing himself bluff and hating himself for it. "Now piss off and don't let me hear another word out of you."

He sat alone in his office with the door shut for a long time after Graham had left, and tried to clear his correspondence. So men looked at porn on the Net—it was human nature. With any luck, Graham might not have done anything criminal. He'd see the chief internal auditor later, just to make sure he knew the size of the problem.

But it was time he should have been out canvassing. One-seat majorities didn't look after themselves.

Petition
From: The Residents Action Committee of Hursley Rise
To: Dennington Vale Borough Council
We the undersigned want the Antichrist and his accomplices off of our estate so decent people can live in peace and safety. We know who they are and where they are. We have a list of them. They should not be living near families. If the council don't get them out then we will

The phone rang.

"Answer the bloody thing," Bev growled into her pillow, and pulled the duvet up over her head. Jeff looked at the alarm clock: it wasn't quite midnight. The voice on the end of the phone was a reporter from the local paper.

"Have you got any comment on the riots, Councilor Blake?"

At first the words didn't register. Jeff turned the word *riot* round in his mind. "What riot?"

"I thought you'd know about it by now. They're setting fire to houses at Hursley Rise and there's a running battle between police and residents. About 120 coppers there now."

Jeff found himself drowning in panic. *Porn scandal, breakdown of law and order, media circus, election disaster.* "I'll get back to you," he said, and slammed the phone down.

He was into his clothes and halfway down the path to the garage when he remembered he had left without telling Bev where he was going, or even knowing which road he was heading for.

But as he drove closer to Hursley he couldn't miss the glow of a blaze outlining the youth activities center, or the police vans heading away from it with their blue lights strobing. The last one to pass him bore the livery of the neighboring county's force; they must have called for reinforcements. A klaxon behind him made him pull over, and a fire engine sped past him, clipping the bollard in the center of the road.

It's just an excuse for DRUNKEN VANDALISM."

Even two streets away he could hear dogs barking, glass smashing, occasional cheers. It sounded like a football match. And then he could smell it—petrol, smoke, and diesel exhaust. He rounded the corner by the eight-till-late, where two men were hammering boards across a shattered window, and slowed to a creep.

A dull thud on the back window made him brake hard. The car stalled. He swung round in his seat, expecting a mob and missiles, but there was nothing. Then someone rapped hard on the passenger side window.

"Jesus—"

"Jeff, turn around. Are you bloody insane?" It was Gwen Hillier, another of the three Hursley Rise ward councilors. He wound down the window. She was pointing frantically, like a crazed race marshal. "I said turn around. Park down Stanley Street."

It took Gwen a few minutes to catch up with him. She leaned on her stick and struggled for breath. The dim red glow shone off the rims of her spectacles.

"I've lived here 60 years and I've never seen them go off like this," she said. "Not that you'd know that, living in Vale End. I've had to run for it. Me! They went berserk and started pointing and saying it was the council's fault for moving them in."

"Who's them? The hordes of Satan?"

"Don't joke. Get round to Barton Crescent and take a look. They won't recognize you, will they? You never come here."

I am the Leader of the Council, Jeff thought. *They'll expect me to do something statesmanlike.* He set off at a jog toward the center of the estate, slowing sooner than he expected to a wheezing half-walk, half-stumble; middle-age wasn't treating him as well as he had imagined. And then, when he reached the junction of Barton Crescent and the main road through the estate, he saw a scene straight from Hieronymus Bosch.

A small van was lying on its side, ablaze. A fire crew was playing a hose on it, retreating every few seconds under a hail of bricks and bottles from a group of youths. Behind them, another crew was trying to get into a house where flames were spitting from a ground-floor window. A cordon of police with visors and riot shields was forcing back screaming residents to clear a path. Everywhere Jeff looked, there were ugly little cameos of violence and destruction, and a disturbing number of small children picking up debris where it fell and hurling it back into the melee.

And there were TV cameras. Jeff spotted them just after they spotted him. A cameraman and a reporter sprinted across to him, dodging bottles.

"Councilor Blake, what do you make of this?"

Jeff couldn't see past the brilliant white light perched on top of the camera, and all he could think of was how scruffy he must have looked without a collar and tie.

"It's—it's an outrage," he said. The autopilot that drove all politicians took over. "This is the work of a few hotheads, probably not even locals."

"But what do you say to people who claim you've allowed the Antichrist to move on to an estate full of families and have ignored pleas to move him out?"

"I say it's complete garbage in this day and age. This isn't the Middle Ages. It's just an excuse for drunken vandalism and I can promise a full enquiry."

The light snapped off, leaving him blinking at yellow afterimages, and he was alone again in a sea of chaos.

He paused for a second and felt helpless. An inner voice said *do something,* but nothing practical came to mind. A brick shattered into fragments a few feet from him and he snapped out of the stupor and made a dash for the car.

He'd never seen anything like it. There would be hell to pay in the morning.

The police superintendent walked toward him, flanked by two sergeants. She wiped her brow on the back of one hand, checker-braided cap in the other. "Glad I caught you," she said. "The place has gone mad. Where's all this Antichrist stuff come from?"

"Bloody media," Jeff said. "Bloody media."

News headlines, Wednesday, April 25

Fifty arrested in Hursley Rise "Antichrist" riots

Twenty police treated in hospital

Two homes looted and burned after residents flee

Tenants action group threatens to picket town hall to get "devil men" evicted

There was a Japanese film crew waiting on the steps up to the town hall's grand Palladian portico. Jeff watched them for a few minutes from the window of the conference room

"Look at them all," said the chief executive. "They've set up satellite links at the back of the building, too."

"Can't complain we're not on the map now, can we, Lennie?" Jeff sat down and leafed through a pile of morning papers, most bearing some headline with the words *riot* and *Antichrist* in 72-point type. "Welcome to Dennington, City of Nutters."

"He's late," the chief executive said. "Bet he's stopped off to survey the damage."

"Beelzebub?"

"No, Head of Housing."

"Have you spoken to Audit about the stuff Graham Vance was downloading?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It's pretty serious. Might be a good idea if he stood down from the Social Services subcommittee. And Audit thinks we should call in the police."

"Oh, *that* bad."

"Up to you, of course, Leader."

You could have made that decision yourself, Jeff thought. But it took a singularly brave chief executive to dump his political masters in the mire days before an election, and Lennie McAndrew was not that man. Nor was Graham Vance's taste in pornography the most pressing problem now.

The meeting was more bewildered than grim. While they discussed the cost of repairs and loopholes in tenancy conditions, nobody seemed keen to say a particular word. But Jeff felt he had to.

"How do we deal with the Antichrist angle?"

"Just make a statement that we'll seek eviction of the rioters and that antisocial behavior won't be tolerated," said Lennie. "Dismiss it as mass hysteria."

Jeff looked at the head of housing. He shrugged. "They're threatening to do the bloke in Stanley Street now."

"Ah, wrong Antichrist, eh?"

"Look, sir, I'm just reporting back. They want us to move him out. They're threatening to march on the town hall tomorrow. We could suggest he move out voluntarily, for his own safety."

"But he doesn't have to go."

"No. He doesn't have to do anything."

"Nothing we can evict him for? Arrears?"

"He's done absolutely nothing, other than being the victim of someone pointing the finger."

Nobody moved. Jeff looked around the table.

"Time for a reassuring visit," Jeff said. "Maybe Superintendent Davis would like to walk round Hursley Rise with me tomorrow. Before the worried citizens of the Rise give the media some handy photo opportunities on our doorstep." He gathered up his papers

and headed for his office.

In the corridor, he ran into the chief internal auditor. The only thing he knew about her was that she liked to follow regulations. He always found it odd that a department whose name suggested number-crunching was actually an internal police force.

"Want to see me?" Jeff said.

"Just wondered if you had been made aware of the seriousness of the material Councilor Vance was accessing."

"I gather it's nasty."

"We really need to let the police take a look at the downloaded files. You *are* going to let me refer it to them, aren't you?"

"As soon as I've got the Hursley Rise situation sorted," he promised, and he knew as soon as the words escaped him that he would find a reason not to.

Had it not been for a dozen TV news crews, a heavy police presence, and scorch marks around the charred window frames of two boarded-up homes, Hursley Rise looked like any other working-class housing estate that morning. A bull terrier with a lavish studded collar was worrying a black plastic sack of rubbish left on the pavement. A man was up a ladder, painting his upstairs window frames a particularly vivid yellow. A workman was installing a satellite dish on the roof of the Duke of Buckingham pub.

"Houseproud area, in parts," said Superintendent Davis. She kept a definite distance from Jeff in the back seat of the police car. He could smell leather, spray starch, and the same Chanel scent that Bev wore. "Half the people here are ex-tenants who've bought their homes. Bet their property prices have fallen a bit overnight, eh?"

The patrol car kept up a reasonable pace, slow enough for the two passengers to ohserve, but too fast to be a target for bricks. Near the row of shops by the bus stop, two constables were engaged in a conversation with a woman pushing a pram.

St. Mark's was a red brick church with a half-hearted bell tower and a peeling notice board; if the forces of darkness were gathering here, it didn't look like God had his troops on the ground. On the threadbare church green stood around a hundred women and a few men, most accompanied by children of varying ages who were showing signs of boredom. Most had placards, held down like lances so that Jeff couldn't read the words, and two small boys were having a sword fight with theirs.

"I can talk them out of this," Jeff said. "Let me out here and I'll go and meet them."

Superintendent Davis looked unimpressed. "Wouldn't you like me there too?"

"Uniform might start them off again."

He thought he heard her stifle a snort, but he said nothing and stepped out of the car into a chilly morning breeze. The 20 yards to the green suddenly seemed like a very long walk. He glanced back over his shoulder to check where the police car had parked.

As he got closer, some of the crowd turned to stare. A child with a placard was facing him, and he could pick out the words on her white T-shirt: KILL EVIL NOW. And suddenly he recognized the woman beside her, with her bright red, dark-rooted hair and festoon of gold chain necklaces.

"Mrs. Avery," he said. "Are you the—leader of the deputation?"

She narrowed her eyes. There was a cigarette smoldering in her hand, held well away from her own child so that the smoke wafted toward someone else's.

"You've come to talk to us now, have you?"

"If that's what you want." He was aware of people closing up behind him. Women and children or not, it was a neck-prickling sensation. "What can I say to reassure you?"

"Just get that bastard out. Or we'll be doing protest marches round the city until you do."

"You know I can't negotiate as long as there's the threat of violence."

Mrs. Avery flicked the growing ash from her stub. "Can't blame people if they get frustrated. We told you them blokes was evil."

"You don't really believe there's an Antichrist, do you?"

She stepped a little closer. She was a head shorter than him and no less terrifying for it. "You go and see him. It's the one next door to me. Stanley Street. The others was just his servants."

Jeff was going to suggest they invite the vicar to join the group to discuss the whole Antichrist concept when a thought hit him, a politician's thought. "OK, Mrs. Avery," he said. "Do you know what I'm going to do now?"

"Amaze me."

"I'm going to walk down to Stanley Street and knock on his door and talk to ..."

"Mr. Hobbs."

" ... talk to Mr. Hobbs and show you he's just a lonely old man. A mortal human. And maybe the kids are scared of him because he shouts at them when they're playing too near his garden. Doesn't that sound like a more rational explanation?"

Mrs. Avery had a half-smile on her face as she ground her cigarette out under a very high heel. She reached for her daughter's hand and pulled the child to her side. "Come on, Kayleigh, pick your placard up and keep behind the man." She gestured like a commissionaire at a posh hotel. "After you, Councilor Blake."

The worst that could happen, Jeff thought, was that the old boy would come out and threaten them with a walking stick. Then he could slip in and offer him a move to a nice new flat in the city center, with resident staff and a communal lounge area, and perhaps a cash incentive to help him settle in. He kept walking, aware that Mrs. Avery was still behind him but at a growing distance. As they came into Stanley Street, she called out, "Number 27."

The two houses on either side were relatively well-kept, one with window boxes of geraniums and one with a red and blue decorative cartwheel hanging on the front wall. But the grass in the gardens was blackened and shriveled along a foot-wide strip where it flanked the house in the middle.

Between them was a house that appeared not to he part of the street.

Jeff looked again. He looked up at the guttering and the line of the roof, and they ran smoothly into the next property. And yet it did not look *there.*

He put his hand on the gate. The wrought iron was polished, unrusted. The path to the door was immaculately laid crazy paving, and there were no plants of any kind, not even the odd weed, just bare earth. He put up his hand to knock on the spotless battleship-gray paintwork.

The door swung open. A man in his late sixties stood there, ordinary as could be in gray corduroy trousers and a gray cardigan, smiling. He seemed to like gray a lot. It was then that Jeff felt the rush of cold air past him, as if he had opened a freezer door.

He looked around to say, "See, Mrs. Avery, he's just ...," but she was too far away. A small crowd standing at stone-throwing distance was staring at the house, and they let loose a volley of bricks. One bounced off the window and hit Jeff in the leg before the old man grabbed his arm and pulled him into the hall to safety.

"You're Mr. Hobbs," Jeff said. His leg stung. He glanced down at his trousers, baffled, and then realized the window was probably toughened double-glazing. "Lucky that didn't smash your window."

"No danger of that. I thought you might pop round, Councilor," said Hobbs. "Come and sit down."

The Antichrist's front parlor contained two gray velveteen chairs, a television, and a plain pine sideboard. There were no photographs on the mantelpiece over the gas fire and no ornaments, except a carriage clock showing 10:23. Above it on the wall where most people might have hung a mirror was a framed sampler, embroidered as usual with an uplifting quotation: *All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing.*

Hobbs appeared in seconds with a tray bearing a pot and two porcelain cups of coffee. It smelled wonderful.

"Can't bear mugs," the old man said. "Got to have a drink out of a proper cup, eh, Councilor Blake?"

"Thank you." The coffee scalded his lips. "I imagine things have been quite hard for you these past few weeks."

"Oh, the stones never touch the house. Don't worry about me."

"Forgive me." Hobbs seemed a pleasant old gent. "They think you're the Antichrist. Wouldn't you like to move out for a while for your own safety? We can get you straight into a new flat. And we'd pay all your expenses, of course."

Hobbs sipped his coffee as if considering the offer. His face was unlined, and his eyes were clear, but all the same he still looked old. "I like it here," he said at last. "I don't have to move, do I?"

"We can't make you, Mr. Hobbs. You've done nothing. But we're worried about your safety, and we don't want any more rioting."

"Then I'll stay. I like it here."

"But—"

Hobbs held up a translucent and manicured hand to command silence, polite and firm, as if he had once been somebody important. "But I'm the Antichrist, Councilor Blake. They can't harm me."

Oh boy, thought Jeff. *They're nuts, and so is he. Maybe he likes the attention. Maybe it stops him feeling so alone.* "OK," he said carefully. "What if they come with the—er—local vicar and try to force you out with the power of God?"

For the first time Hobbs showed the faintest hint of annoyance and his forehead puckered slightly. "Now you're mocking me, Councilor Blake."

Play along. Jeff snatched an idea out of memories of Sunday School. "If you're the Antichrist, why come to Hursley Rise? Why not the Middle East?"

"It's the atmosphere." Hobbs got up and inspected the coffee pot before topping up both cups. "No, there's plenty of raw material here for me. Apathy, suspicion, and cowardice. Would you call yourself a Christian, Councilor?"

"I suppose so."

"Then you probably think there's a little bit of God in all people. Personally, I think there's a little bit of *me* in everyone." He smiled engagingly, instantly a favorite uncle. "In political terms, I like to think of myself as the Opposition spokesman."

Jeff stared back at him for a while. He was, in every sense, the picture of harmless normality, except for the young-old face, and the absence of all living things in the garden, and that cold, cold air. As Jeff stared, he could see his own breath forming wispy vapor in front of him and yet he didn't feel chilled. The clock now showed 11:15. Startled, Jeff bent his head automatically to drain his coffee cup, expecting to find it cold and the ideal cue to leave.

It scalded his mouth. He flinched.

"Still nice and hot," Hobbs said. "Shall I show you out?"

"Thank you." Jeff stood up and had to cast around him to find the door. "You'll think about what I said, though?"

"And you'll think about what I said." He smiled. "And don't worry too much about Graham Vance, will you?"

Jeff stopped, half-formed a question, and then thought better of it. He went to the window and rapped lightly on the pane with his knuckle. It was plain, ordinary, single-sheet glass—not toughened, not double-skinned. At that point he wanted to get out of the house more than anything he had ever wanted in his life.

The police car was waiting at a discreet distance.

"Bricks never break his bloody windows," said the constable driving the car. It was the first time he had spoken. "None of us want to go near the place."

They drove off. Jeff locked his hands together to stop the shaking, meshing his fingers until they went white. And his lips still burned.

Letters to the Editor
Saturday, April 28
Dear Sir,
Since Tuesday my life has been made a misery by these women parading up and down the streets with their children at all hours in a so-called peaceful protest. My car has been damaged and they have taken stones from my rock garden to throw at houses. I have lived at Hursley Rise for 30 years and I worked hard to buy my house to better myself. Shame on the council for not putting a stop to it.
Yours faithfully,
A respectable resident

Wednesday, May 2

The chief executive's office overlooked the square and gave Jeff an excellent view of the protesters milling beneath them. On one side, Mrs. Avery's army of angry women trailed by toddlers was assembling; on the other, a smaller group of people milled around with placards bearing legends like *listen to the silent majority* and *let us live in peace.*

Mrs. Avery's troops waved placards a little less considered in their exhortations. Jeff could see at least one with *burn them out* and a child sporting a T-shirt labeled *Satin is amoung us.*

"I think our education initiative in Hursley might have failed, judging by the spelling," said Lennie McAndrew, munching a chocolate biscuit. Both men stood at the window and waited. In the no-man's land between the factions, film crews and police drifted, both stopping to interview in their own manner.

"You'd think the police would clear them out," Jeff said.

"A right to peaceful protest," said Lennie. "It's not as if they've done anything."

Jeff spotted Mrs. Avery giving an earnest interview to a TV reporter, waving her arm passionately in the direction of the town hall. A toddler she had been gripping by the hand wandered off unnoticed. The noise of the crowd, audible even with the win-

There Were NO FLOWERS or

dows closed, began growing from a hum into a tumult.

Something had clearly upset Mrs. Avery. She broke off from the interview and elbowed her way through the crowd to where a group of Concerned Residents Against Rioters had gathered. She flung herself at a man in a red tracksuit and that was the last Jeff saw of her as the crowd began closing up and fighting broke out.

"I was afraid this would happen," said Lennie. Police could be seen as small dark-blue patches struggling in the crowd, salmon swimming against the current. "It's a police matter now, Jeff. Nothing we can do." The chief executive pulled the blinds. "Time you thought about the election."

"Right now, I'd rather not."

"About Graham Vance."

Jeff felt his heart sink. "What about him?"

"Either you or I have the authority to refer the case to the police. I can understand why you might not want to do it before the election. Bear in mind that once we start the process going, we have to inform Social Services because of the child protection angle. And after that we have very little control of it."

"What are you saying exactly?"

"You might want to delay this a day or so—say after the election."

Jeff considered it. Yes, that would be far enough from this election and far ahead enough of the next for the political damage to be minimized. But if Vance really was a risk to anyone, he had enough time to cover his tracks and continue whatever he might be doing.

Lennie seemed to interpret Jeff's silence as a prompt. "Or we could just sort it out internally. No fuss."

"Do nothing, you mean."

"Not exactly nothing—"

"You sound a lot like someone I was talking to yesterday," Jeff said, and he felt acid rise in his throat. "Maybe there really is a bit of Hobbs in us all."

Jeff went back to his own office and checked his messages. There were five threats of legal action from homeowners in Hursley Rise whose house sales had fallen through following the disturbances, and 10 council tenants asking to be moved out of the area because they were afraid of reprisals.

It bothered Jeff that they called him rather than the housing department. That meant they identified him as the cause and solution to their crisis, and that boded ill for the polls on Thursday. The city was going to the dogs. And he was sure he could do nothing to stop it.

Hobbs the Possible Antichrist nodded politely, a listening nod rather than an agreeing nod. "You believe them now, don't you?"

"Let's just say I've seen what you can do and the effect is the same whether you're who you say you are or not. This neighborhood is destroyed. The buildings. Relationships. Trust. You've done it."

"I haven't done anything, Councilor Blake." Hobbs topped up his cup from the cheaply plated pot designed to look like chased silver. "I didn't have to. They did it all by themselves, and they started doing it the minute they didn't care where their kids were at night, or when they turned a blind eye to stolen goods, or even when they dumped their engine oil down the drain. That's why I didn't seek out war and unrest, Councilor. I can do my business best where people will do nothing, however small, to make things better."

"You create strife."

"It was always here."

"You've made damn sure they'll have something to fight over."

"As I said, Councilor, I've done nothing." He smiled, a really genuine smile. "Like you. You do nothing quite often, don't you? There's just the one of me. It took many more humans to bring this estate to its knees, and I couldn't have done it without them."

I am having a debate with the Antichrist. Jeff grasped at a fleeting feeling of amazement. All the party coups he had survived, all the secrets and favors he held against a political rainy day, were instantly dwarfed. He had no media audience and yet he felt his sins were broadcast to the whole world.

The Antichrist's smile widened, as if he had shared Jeff's moment of revelation. "Graham Vance," he said. "Your own personal share of inaction, among many. Good day, Councilor Blake."

When he walked back down Hobbs' path again, he noticed the dead patches of grass either side of Hobbs' fence had spread to swallow up both adjoining gardens.

It was still a pleasant spring day, even if he did have to dodge a petrol bomb lobbed by a couple of kids. Jeff left Hursley Rise dwindling in his rearview mirror. The farther he drove from the riot zone, the more normal the world became. He counted the lilac trees: one, a gap, then twos and threes, and then a wall of blossom, and the scent that drifted in through the air vents was almost sickeningly sweet. He wondered how long it would be before they dried and shriveled, too.

He pulled into a garage to fill up. As he waited at the cash desk for his receipt, he glanced at the lunchtime edition of the local

bushes in bloom, NOR ANY BLACKBIRDS calling.

Police sirens wailed three stories below. God only knew what the headlines would look like in the papers. Perhaps he could pull off something by lunchtime, something at the 12th hour that would give him the front page in the evening paper. He decided to visit Mr. Hobbs one last time.

The Antichrist was sitting by the small fishpond in his back garden. There were neither fish in it nor plants; the surface was a frozen mirror. And there were no flowers or bushes in bloom, nor any starlings or blackbirds calling.

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation," Jeff said. The coffee was black and still did not seem to be cooling however long he left it. "But I'll ask again. Please, move out. Leave us alone and let these people try and heal their community."

paper on the counter. *Elections tomorrow: who can save the city?* said the headline. "Not me," Jeff muttered, and the cashier glanced at him.

He pocketed his change and thought of Graham Vance. *You do nothing.* The taunt stung him. Nothing. And maybe he wasn't the man to save the city, either, but he had a growing feeling that there was one thing he could do, a small and selfless act that might start the world moving in another direction.

He took out his phone, thumbed through the directory, and began dialing the Chief Internal Auditor. The news about Vance would probably break just as the polls opened in the morning, making up the minds of all the abstainers and don't-knows.

It had felt good being in office. He'd miss it.





Crossing into the Empire

By Robert Silverberg

Illustration by Todd Lockwood

Sometimes when exotic adventure beckons, it's best just to stay home in bed.

Mulreany is still asleep when the Empire makes its midyear reappearance, a bit ahead of schedule. It was due to show up in Chicago on the afternoon of June 24, somewhere between 5 and 6 o'clock, and here it is only 8 goddamned o'clock in the morning on the 23rd and the phone is squalling and it's Anderson on the line to say, "Well, I can't exactly tell you why, boss, but it's back here already, over on the Near West Side. The eastern border runs along Blue Island Avenue, and up as far north as the Eisenhower Expressway, practically. Duplessis says that this time it's going to be a 52-hour visitation, plus or minus 90 minutes."

Dazzling summer sunlight floods Mulreany's bedroom, high up above the lake. He hates being awake at this hour. Blinking, grimacing, he says, "If Duplessis missed the time of arrival by a day and a half, how the hell can he be so sure about the visitation length? Sometimes I think Duplessis is full of shit. —Which Empire is it, anyway? What are the towers in the Forum like?"

"The big square pointy-topped pink one is there, with two slender ones flanking it, dark stone, golden domes," Anderson says.

"Basil III, most likely."

"You're the man who'd know, boss. How soon do we go across?"

"It's eight in the morning, Stu."

"Jesus, we've only got the 52 hours, and then there won't be another chance until Christmas. Fifty-one and a half, by now. Everything's packed and ready to go whenever you are."

"Come get me at half past nine."

"What about nine sharp?" Anderson says hopefully.

"I need some time to shower and get my costume on, if that's all right with you," Mulreany says. "Half past nine."

It's the Empire of Basil III this time, no question about that. What has arrived is the capital city from the waterfront all the way back to the Walls of Artabanus and even a little strip of the Byzantine Quarter beyond—the entire magnificent metropolis, that great antique city of a hundred palaces and five hundred temples and mosques, green parks and leafy promenades, shining stone obelisks and eye-dazzling colonnades. The Caspian Sea side of the city lines up precisely along South Blue Island Avenue, with the wharves and piers of the city harbor high and dry, jutting from the eastern side of the street. The longest piers reach a couple of blocks beyond Blue Island where it crosses Polk, stretching almost to the southbound lanes of the Dan Ryan Expressway, which seems to be the absolute boundary of the materialization zone. A bunch of fishing boats and what looks like an imperial barge have been taken along for the ride this time, and sit forlornly beached right at the zone's flickering edge, cut neatly in half, their stems visible here in Chicago but their bows still back in the 12th century. The whole interface line is bright with the customary shimmering glow. You could walk around the outside edge of the interface and find yourself in the Near West Side, which has been intruded upon but not harmed. Or you could go straight ahead into that glowing field of light and step across the boundary into the capital of the Empire.

One glance and Mulreany has no doubt that the version of the capital that that has arrived on this trip is the 12th-century one. The two golden-domed towers of black basalt that Basil III erected to mark the 20th anniversary of his accession are visible high above the Forum on either side of the pink marble Tower of Nicholas IX, but there's no sign of the gigantic hexagonal Cathedral of All the Gods that Basil's nephew and successor, Simeon II, will eventually build on what is presently the site of the camel market. So Mulreany can date the manifestation of the Empire that he is looking at now very precisely to the period between 1150 and 1185. Which is good news, not only because that was one of the richest periods of the Empire's long history, making today's trading possibilities especially promising, but also because the Empire of the time of Basil III turns up here more often than that of any other era, and Mulreany knows his way around Basil's capital almost like a native. Considering the risks involved, he prefers to he in familiar territory when he's doing business over there.

The usual enormous crowd is lined up along the interface, gawking goggle-eyed at the medieval city across the way. "You'd think the dopey bastards had never seen the Empire get here before," Mulreany mutters as he and Anderson clamher out of the limo and head for the police barricade. The usual murmuring goes up from the onlookers at the sight of them in their working clothes.

Mulreany, as the front man in this enterprise, has outfitted himself elegantly in a tight-sleeved, close-fitting knee-length tunic of green silk piped with scarlet brocade, turquoise hose, and soft leather boots in the Persian style. On his head he wears a stiff and lofty pyramid-shaped hat of Turkish design, on his left hip a long curving dagger in an elaborately chased silver sheath. Anderson, as befits his lesser status, is more simply garhed in an old-fashioned flowing tunic of pale muslin, baggy blue trousers, and sandals; his headgear is a white bonnet tied by a red ribbon. These are the clothes of a merchant of late imperial times and his amanuensis, nothing unusual over there, hut pretty gaudy stuff to see on a Chicago street, and they draw plenty of attention.

Duplessis, Schmidt, and Kulikowski wait by the barricade, gabbing with a couple of the cops. Schmidt has a short woolen tunic on, like the porter he is supposed to be; he is toting the trading merchandise, two bulging burlap bags. Neither Duplessis nor Kulikowski is in costume. They won't be going across. They're antiquities dealers; what they do is peddle the goodies that Mulreany and his two assistants bring back from their ventures into the Empire. They don't ever put their own necks on the line over there.

Duplessis is fidgeting around, the way he always does, looking at his watch every 10 seconds or so. "About time you got here, Mike," he tells Mulreany. "The clock is ticking-ticking-ticking."

"Ticking so fast the Empire showed up a day and a half early, didn't it?" Mulreany says sourly. "You screwed up the calculation a little, eh?"

"Christ, man! It's never all that precise and you know it. We've got a lot of complicated factors to take into account. The equinoctial precession—the whole sidereal element—the problem of topological displacement—listen, Mike, I do my best. It gets here every six months, give or take a couple of days, that's all we can figure. There's no way I can tell you to the split second when it's going to—"

"What about the calculation of when it leaves again? Suppose you miss that one by a factor of a couple of days, too?"

"No," Duplessis says. "No chance. The math's perfectly clear: this is a two-day visitation. Look, stop worrying, Mike. You sneak across, you do your business, you come back late tomorrow afternoon. You're just grouchy because you don't like getting up this early."

"And you ought to start moving," Kulikowski tells him. "Waxman and Gross went across an hour ago. There's Davidson about to cross over down by Roosevelt, and here comes McNeill."

Mulreany nods. Competitors, yes, moving in on all sides. The Empire's already been in for a couple of hours; most of the licensed crossers are probably there by now. But what the hell; there's plenty for everybody. "You got the coins?" he asks.

Kulikowski hands Mulreany a jingling velvet purse: some walking-around money. He shakes a few of the coins out into his palm. The Emperor Basil's broad big-nosed face looks up at him from the shiny obverse of a gold nomisma. There are a couple of little silver argentei from the time of Casimir and a few thick, impressive copper sesterces showing the hooded profile of Empress Juliana.

Impatiently Kulikowski says, "What do you think, Mike, I'd give you the wrong ones? Nothing there's later than Basil III. Nothing earlier than the Peloponnesian Dynasty." Passing false money, or obsolete money that has been withdrawn from circulation by imperial decree, is a serious mercantile crime over there, punishable by mutilation for the first offense, by death for the second. There are no decrees about passing money of emperors yet to be born, naturally. But that would be stupid as well as dangerous.

"Come on, Mike," Duplessis says. "Time's wasting. Go on in."

"How long did you say can I stay?"

"Like I told you. Almost until sundown tomorrow."

"That long? You sure?"

"You think it does me any good if you get stranded over there?" Duplessis says. "Trust me. I tell you you've got until sundown, you've got until sundown. Go on, now. Will you get going, for Christ's sake?"

There's no need for Mulreany to show his transit license. The police know all the licensed border-crossers. Only about two dozen people have the right combination of skills—the knowledge of the Empire's language and customs, the knack of doing business in a medieval country, the willingness to take the risks involved in making the crossing. The risks are big, and crossers don't always come back. The Empire's official attitude toward the merchants who come over from Chicago is that they are sorcerers of some kind, and the penalty for sorcery is public beheading, so you have to keep a low profile as you do your business. Then, too, there's the chance of catching some archaic disease that's unknown and incurable in the modern era, or simply screwing up your timing and getting stuck over there in the Empire when it pops back to its own period of history. There are also other odd little one-in-a-thousand glitch possibilities. You have to have the intellectual equipment of a college professor plus the gall of a bank robber to make a successful living as a crosser.

The easiest place to enter today, according to Kulikowski, is the corner of Blue Island and Taylor. The imperial city is only about four feet above Chicago street level there, and Kulikowski has brought along a plank that he sets up as a little bridge to carry them up the slight grade. Mulreany leads the way; Anderson follows, and Schmidt brings up the rear, toting the two bags of trade goods. As they pass through the eerie yellow glow of the interface Mulreany glances back

at Duplessis and Kulikowski, who are beginning to fade from view. He grins, winks, gives them the upturned thumb. Another couple of steps and Chicago disappears altogether, nothing visible now to the rear except the golden flicker, opaque when seen from this side, that marks the border of the materialization zone. They are in the Empire now. Halfway across the planet and nine centuries ago in time, waltzing once more into the glittering capital city of the powerful realm that was the great rival of the Byzantines and the Turks for the domination of the medieval world.

Can of corn, he tells himself.

In today, out tomorrow, another 10 or 20 million bucks' worth of highly desirable and readily saleable treasures in the bag.

The imperial barge—its back half, anyway—is just on their left as they come up the ramp. Its hull bears the royal crest and part of an inscription testifying to the greatness of the Emperor. Lounging alongside it with their backs to the interface glow are half a dozen rough-looking members of the Bulgarian Guard, the Emperor's crack private militia. Bad news right at the outset. They give Mulreany and his companions black menacing glances.

"Nasty bastards," Anderson murmurs. "They going to be difficult, you think?"

"Nah. Just practicing looking tough," says Mulreany. "We stay cool and we'll be OK." Staying cool means telling yourself that you are simply an innocent merchant from a distant land who happens to be here at this unusual time purely by coincidence, and never showing a smidgen of uneasiness. "But keep close to your gun, all the same."

"Right." Anderson slips his hand under his tunic. Both he and Schmidt are armed. Mulreany isn't. He never is.

He figures they'll get past the guardsmen OK. The Bulgars are a wild and unpredictable bunch, but Mulreany knows that nobody over here wants to go out of his way to find trouble at a time when the weird golden light in the sky is shining, not even the Bulgars, because when the light appears and everything surrounding the capital disappears from the view of its inhabitants it means that the powers of sorcery are at work again. Events like this have been going on for 800 years in this city, and everyone understands by now that during one of the sorcery-times there's a fair possibility that some stranger you try to hassle may come right back at you and hit you with very mighty mojo indeed. It's been known to happen.

This is something like Mulreany's 25th crossing—he doesn't keep count, but he doesn't miss an Empire appearance and he's been a licensed crosser for about a dozen years—and he knows his way around town as well as anybody in the trade. The big boulevard that runs along the shore parallel to the wharves is the Street of the Eastern Sun, which leads to the Plaza of the Customs-Brokers, from which five long streets radiate into different parts of the city: the Street of Persians, the Street of Turks, the Street of Romans, the Street of Jews, and the Street of Thieves. There are no Jews to be found on the Street of Jews or anywhere else in the capital, not since the Edict of Thyarodes VII, but most of the best metalworkers and jewelers and ivory carvers have shops in the quadrant between the Street of Jews and the Street of Thieves, so it's in that section that Mulreany will make his headquarters while he's here.

Plenty of citizens are milling around in the Plaza of the Customs-Brokers, which is one of the city's big gathering places. Mulreany hears them chattering in a whole bouillabaisse of languages. Greek is the Empire's official tongue, but Mulreany can also make out Latin, Persian, Turkish, Arabic, a Slavic dialect, and something that sounds a little like Swedish. Nobody is very upset by what has happened to the city. They've all had experience with this sort of thing before, and all of them are aware that it's just a temporary thing: when the sky turns golden and the capital goes flying off into the land of sorcery, the thing to do is sit tight and wait for everything to get back to normal again, which it eventually will do.

He and Anderson and Schmidt slide smoothly into the crowd, trying to seem inconspicuous without conspicuously seeming to be trying to seem inconspicuous, and leave the plaza on the far side by way of the Street of Jews. There was a decent hotel seven or eight blocks up that way the last time he was here in the reign of Basil III, and though he doesn't know whether the date of that visit, in Empire time, was five years ago or five years yet to come, he figures there's a good chance the hotel will be there today. Things don't change really fast in the medieval world, except when some invading horde comes in and rearranges the real estate, and that isn't due to happen in this city for another couple of centuries.

"WE ARE BUT SIMPLE FOLK, WITH NONE OF THE DEVIL'S GOODS IN OUR BAGS."

The hotel is exactly where he remembers it. It's not quite in a class with the Drake or the Ritz-Carlton: more like a big barn, in fact, since the ground floor is entirely given over to straw-strewn stables for the horses and camels and donkeys of the guests, and the actual guest rooms are upstairs, a series of small square chambers with stiff, clammy mattresses placed right on the stone floors, and tiny windows that have actual glass in them, almost clear enough to see through. Nothing lavish, not even really very comfortable, but the place is reasonably clean, at least, with respectable lavatory facilities on every floor and a relatively insignificant population of bugs and ticks. A pleasant smell of spices from the bazaar next door, ginger and aniseed and nutmeg and cinnamon, maybe a little opium and hashish too, drifts in and conceals other less savory aromas that might be wandering through the building. The place is OK. It'll do for one night, anyway.

The innkeeper is a different one from last time, a gap-toothed red-haired Greek with only one eye, who gives Mulreany a leering smirk and says, "In town for the sorcery-trading, are you?"

"The what?" Mulreany asks, all innocence.

"Don't pretend you don't know, brother. What do you think that ring of witch-fire is, all around the city? Where do you think the Eastern Sea has gone, and the Genoese Quarter, and Persian Town, and everything else that lies just outside the city walls? It's sorcery-time here again, my friend!"

"Is it, now?" Mulreany says, making no great show of interest. "I wouldn't know. My cousins and I are here to deal in pots and pans, and perhaps do a little business in daggers and swords." He colors his Greek with a broad, braying yokel accent, by way of emphasizing that he's much too dumb to be a sorcerer.

But the innkeeper is annoyingly persistent. "Merely let me have one of those metal tubes that bring near what is far off," he says, with a little wheedling movement of his big shoulders, "and my best rooms are yours for three weeks, and all your meals besides."

He must mean a spyglass. Binoculars aren't likely to do him much good. Even more broadly Mulreany says, "Pots, yes, my good brother. Pans, yes. But miraculous metal tubes, I must say ye nay. Such things are not our commodities, brother."

The lone eye, ice-blue and bloodshot, bores nastily in on him. "Would a knife of many blades be among your commodities, then? A metal box of fire? A flask of the devil's brandy?"

"I tell you, we be not sorcerers," says Mulreany stolidly, letting just a bit of annoyance show. He shifts his weight slowly from leg to leg, a ponderous hayseed gesture. "We are but decent, simple merchants in search of lodging in return for good coin, and if we cannot find

it here, brother, we fain must seek it elsewhere."

He starts to swing about to leave. The innkeeper hastily backs off from his wheedling, and Mulreany is able to strike a straightforward deal for a night's lodging, three rooms for a couple of heavy copper sesterces, with tomorrow's breakfast of rough bread, preserved lamb, and beer thrown in.

Wistfully the innkeeper says, "I was sure at last I had some sorcerers before me, who would favor me with some of the wondrous things that the high dukes possess."

"You have sorcerers on the brain," Mulreany tells him, as they start upstairs. "We are but simple folk, with none of the devil's goods in our bags."

Does the innkeeper believe him? Who knows? They all covet the illicit stuff the sorcerers bring, but only the very richest can afford it. Skepticism and greed still glitter in that single eye.

Well, Mulreany has told nothing but God's truth: he is no sorcerer, just a merchant from a far land. But real sorcerers must have been at work here at some time in the past. What else could it have been but black magic, Mulreany figures, that set the city floating in time in the first place? The capital, he knows, has been adrift for most of its lengthy history. He himself, on various crossings, has entered versions of the city as early as that of the reign of Miklos, who was 4th century AD, and as late as the somber time of Kartouf the Hapless, right at the end, just before the Mongol conquest in 1412. For Chicagoans, the periodic comings and goings of the city are just an interesting novelty, but for these people it must be a real nuisance to find themselves constantly floating around in time and space. Mulreany imagines that one of the imperial wizards must have accidentally put the hex on the place long ago, some kind of wizardy experiment that misfired and set up a time-travel effect that won't stop.

"Half past 10," Mulreany announces. It's more like noon, actually—the sun's practically straight overhead, glinting behind the spooky light of the interface effects—but he'll stay on Chicago time throughout the crossing. It's simpler that way. If Duplessis is right, the city is due to disappear back into its own era about 11 o'clock Thursday morning. Mulreany likes a 12- to 14-hour safety margin, which means heading back into Chicago by 7 o'clock or so Wednesday night. "Let's get to work," he says.

The first stop is a jeweler's shop three blocks east of the Street of Jews that belongs to a Turkish family named Suleimanyi. Mulreany has been doing satisfactory business with the Suleimanyis, on and off, for something like a century Empire time, beginning with Mehmet Suleimanyi early in Basil III's reign and continuing with his grandfather Ahmet, who ran the shop 50 years earlier in the time of the Emperor Polifemas, and then with Mehmet's son Ali, and with Ali's grandson, also named Mehmet, during the reign of Simeon II. He does his best to conceal from the various Suleimanyis that he's been coming to them out of chronological order, but he doubts that they would care anyway. What they care about is the profit they can turn on the highly desirable foreign goods he brings them. It's a real meeting of common interests, every time.

Mulreany gets a blank look of nonrecognition from the man who opens the slitted door of the familiar shop for him. The Suleimanyis all look more or less alike—slender, swarthy, hawk-nosed men with impressive curling mustachios—and Mulreany isn't sure, as he enters, which one he's encountering today. This one has the standard Suleimanyi features and appears to be about 30. Mulreany assumes, pending further information, that it's Mehmet the First or his son Ali, the main Suleimanyis of Basil's reign, but perhaps he has showed up on this trip some point in time at which neither of them has met him before. So for all intents and purposes he is facing an absolute stranger. You get a lot of mismatches of this sort when you move back and forth across the time interface.

A tricky business. He has to decide whether to identify himself for what he really is or to fold his cards and try someplace else that seems safer. It calls for an act of faith: there's always the chance that the man he approaches may figure that there's more profit to be had in selling him out to the police as a sorcerer than in doing business with him. But the Suleimanyis have always been on the up and up and Mulreany has no reason to mistrust this one. So he takes a deep breath and offers a sweeping salaam and says, in classier Greek than he had used with the innkeeper, "I am Mulreany of Chicago, who once more returns bringing treasure from afar to offer my friend the inestimable master Suleimanyi."

This is the moment of maximum danger. He searches Suleimanyi's face for hints of incipient treachery.

But what he sees is a quick, warm smile with nothing more sinister than balance-sheet calculations behind it: a flash of genuine mercantile pleasure. The jeweler eagerly beckons him into the shop, which is dark and musty, lit only by two immense wax tapers. Anderson and Schmidt come in behind him, Schmidt taking care to bolt the door. Suleimanyi snaps his fingers, and a small solemn boy of about 10 appears out of the shadows, bearing an ornate flask and four shallow crystal bowls. The jeweler pours some sort of yellowish-green brandy for them. "My late father often spoke of you, O Mulreany, and his father before him. It gives me great joy that you have returned to us. I am Selim, son of Ali."

If Ali is dead, this must be very late in the long reign of Basil III. The little boy is probably Mehmet the Second, whom Mulreany will meet 20 or 30 years down the line in the time of Emperor Simeon. It makes him a little edgy to discover that he has landed here in the great Emperor Basil's final years, because the Emperor apparently went a little crazy when he was very old, turning into something of a despot, and a lot of peculiar things were known to have occurred. But what the hell: they don't plan to be dropping in for tea at the imperial palace.

Before any transactions can take place an elaborate ritual of sipping the fiery brandy and exchanging bland snippets of conversation must occur. Selim Suleimanyi politely inquires after the health of the monarch of Mulreany's country and asks if it has been the case that unruly barbarians have been causing problems for them lately along their borders. Mulreany assures him that all is well in and around Chicago and that the Mayor is fine. He expresses the hope that the Empire's far-flung armies are meeting with success in the distant lands where they currently campaign. This goes on and on, an interminable spinning of trivial talk. Mulreany has learned to be patient. There is no hurrying these bazaar guys. But finally Suleimanyi says, "Perhaps now you will show me the things you have brought with you."

Mulreany has his own ritual for this. Schmidt opens one of the big burlap bags and holds it stolidly out; Mulreany gives instructions in English to Anderson; Anderson pulls items out of the bag and lays them out for Suleimanyi's inspection.

Five Swiss Army knives come forth first. Then two nice pairs of Bausch & Lomb binoculars, and three cans of Coca-Cola.

"All right," Mulreany orders. "Hold it there."

He waits. Suleimanyi opens a chest beneath the table and draws out a beautiful ivory hunting horn encircled by three intricately engraved silver bands showing dogs, stags, and hunters. He rests it expectantly on his open palm and smiles.

"A couple of more Cokes," Mulreany says. "And three bottles of Giorgio."

Suleimanyi's smile grows broader. But still he doesn't hand over the hunting horn.

"Plus two of the cigarette lighters," says Mulreany.

Even that doesn't seem to be enough. There is a long, tense pause. "Take away one of the Swiss Army knives and pull out six ballpoint pens."

The subtraction of the knife is intended as a signal to Suleimanyi that Mulreany is starting to reach the limits of his price. Suleimanyi understands. He picks up one of the binoculars, twiddles with its focus, peers through it. Binoculars have long been one of the most popular trading items for Mulreany, the magical tubes that bring far things close. "Another of these?" Suleimanyi says.

"In place of two knives, yes."

"Done," says Suleimanyi.

Now it's the Turk's turn. He produces an exquisite pendant of gold filigree inlaid with cloisonné enamel and hands it to Mulreany to be admired. Mulreany tells Anderson to bring out the Chanel Number Five, a bottle of Chivas, two more pairs of binoculars, and a packet of sewing needles. Suleimanyi appears pleased, but not pleased enough. "Give him a compass," Mulreany orders.

Obviously Suleimanyi has never seen a compass before. He fingers the shiny steel case and says, "What is this?"

Mulreany indicates the needle. "This points north. Now turn toward the door. Do you see? The needle still points north."

The jeweler grasps the principle, and its commercial value in a maritime nation, instantly. His eyes light up and he says, "One more of these and we have a deal."

"Alas," says Mulreany. "Compasses are great rarities. I can spare only one." He signals Anderson to begin putting things away.

But Suleimanyi, grinning, pulls back his hand when Mulreany reaches for the compass. "It is sufficient, then, the one," he says. "The pendant is yours." He leans close. "This is witchcraft, this north-pointing device?"

"Not at all. A simple natural law at work."

"Ah. Of course. You will bring me more of these?"

"On my very next visit," Mulreany promises.

They move along, after Suleimanyi has treated them to the spicy tea that concludes every business transaction in the Empire. Mulreany doesn't like to do all his trading at a single shop. He goes looking now for a place he remembers near the intersection of Baghdad Way and the Street of Thieves, a dealer in precious stones, but it isn't there; what he finds instead, though, is even better: a Persian goldsmith's place where—after more brandy, more chitchat—he warily lets it be known that he has unusual merchandise from far-off lands for sale, meets with a reassuring response, and exchanges some Swiss Army knives, binoculars, various sorts of perfume, a bottle of Jack Daniels, and a pair of roller skates for a fantastic necklace of interwoven gold chains studded with pearls, amethysts, and emeralds. Even at that the Persian evidently feels guilty about the one-sidedness of the deal, and while they are sipping the inevitable wrapping-up tea he presses a pair of exquisite earrings set with gaudy rubies on Mulreany as an unsolicited sweetener. "You will come back to me the next time," he declares intensely. "I will have even finer things for you—you will see!"

"And we'll have some gorgeous pruning shears for you," Mulreany tells him. "Maybe even a sewing machine or two."

"I await them with extraordinary zeal," declares the Persian ebulliently, just as though he understands what Mulreany is talking about. "Such miraculous things have long been desired by me!"

The sincerity of his greed is obvious and comforting. Mulreany always counts on the cheerful self-interest of the bazaar dealers—and the covetousness of the local aristocrats to whom the bazaaris sell the merchandise that they buy from the sorcerers from Chicago—to preserve his neck. Sorcery is a capital offense here, sure, but the allure of big profits for the bazaaris and the insatiable hunger among the wealthy for exotic toys like Swiss Army knives and cigarette lighters causes everybody to wink at the laws. Almost everybody, anyway.

As they emerge from the Persian's shop Schmidt says, "Hey, isn't that our innkeeper down the block?"

"That son of a bitch," Mulreany mutters. "Let's hope not." He follows Schmidt's pointing finger and sees a burly red-haired man heading off in the opposite direction. The last thing he needs is for the innkeeper to spot the purported dealers in pots and pans doing business in the jewelry bazaar. But red hair isn't all that uncommon in this city and in all likelihood the innkeeper is busy banging one of the chambermaids at this very moment. He's glad Schmidt is on his toes, anyway.

They go onward now down the Street of Thieves and back past the Baths of Amozyas and the Obelisk of Suplicides into a district thick with astrologers and fortune-tellers, where they pause at a kebab stand for a late lunch of sausages and beer, and then, as the afternoon winds down, they go back into the bazaar quarter. Mulreany succeeds in locating, after following a couple of false trails, the shop of a bookseller he remembers, where a staff of shaven-headed Byzantine scribes produces illuminated manuscripts for sale to the nobility. The place doesn't normally do off-the-shelf business, but Mulreany has been able on previous trips to persuade them to sell books that were awaiting pickup by the duke or prince who had commissioned them, and he turns the trick again this time. He comes away with a gloriously illustrated vellum codex of the *Iliad*, with an astonishing binding of tooled ebony inlaid with gold and three rows of rubies, in exchange for some of their remaining knives, Coca-Cola, cigarette lighters, sunglasses, and whiskey, and another of the little pocket-compasses. This is shaping up into one of the best buying trips in years.

"We ought to have brought a lot more compasses," Anderson says, when they're outside and looking around for their last deal of the day before heading back to the inn. "They don't take up much space in the bag and they really turn everybody on."

"Next trip," says Mulreany. "I agree: they're a natural."

"I still can't get over this entire business," Schmidt says wonderingly. This is only his third time across. "That they're willing to swap fabulous museum masterpieces like these for pocketknives and cans of Coke. And they'd go out of their minds over potato chips too, I bet."

"But those things aren't fabulous museum masterpieces to them," Mulreany says. "They're just routine luxury goods that it's their everyday business to make and sell. Look at it from their point of view. We come in here with a sackful of miracles that they couldn't duplicate in a hundred years. Five hundred. They can always take some more gold and some more emeralds and whack out another dozen necklaces. But where the hell are they going to get a pair of binoculars except from us? And Coke probably tastes like ambrosia to them. So it's just as sweet a deal for them as it is for us, and—Hello, look who's here!"

Waxman, as he crosses the street, puts one finger to his lips. "Ixnay on the English, Mike," he says, keeping his voice low. "Let's stick to the Grik, OK, man? And not so much yelling." He casts a shifty look down toward the end of the block, where a couple of the ubiquitous Bulgarian Guardsmen are lolling against the wall of a mosque.

"Something wrong?" Mulreany asks.

"Plenty. Don't you know? The word is out that the Emperor has ordered a crackdown. He's just told the imperial gendarmerie to pull in anybody caught dealing in sorcery goods."

"You sure about that? Why would he want to rock the boat?"

"Well, the old man's crazy, isn't he? Maybe he woke up this morning and decided it was time finally to enforce his own goddamned laws. All I know is that I've done a very nice day's business and I'm going to call it a trip right here and now."

"Sure," Mulreany says. "If that's what you want. But not me. The Emperor can issue any cockeyed order he likes, but that doesn't mean anyone will pay attention. Too many people in this town get big benefits out of the trade we bring."

"You're going to stay?"

"Right. Till sundown tomorrow. There's business to do here."

"You're welcome to it," Waxman says. "I wish you a lot of joy of it. Me, I'm for dinner at Charlie Trotter's tonight, and to hell with turning any more tricks here just now, thank you. Not if there's a chance I'll miss the last bus back to the Loop." Waxman blows Mulreany a kiss, beckons to his porter, and starts off up the street.

"We really going to stay?" Schmidt asks, when Waxman has moved along.

Mulreany gives him a scornful look. "We've still got almost a bag and a half of goods to trade, don't we?"

"But if this Waxman thinks that—"

"He was always a chickenshit wimp," Mulreany says. "Look, if they were really serious about their sorcery laws here, they'd have ways of reaching out and picking us up just like that. Go into the bazaar, ask the dealers who they got their Swiss Army knives from, and give them the old bamboo on the soles of the feet until they cough up our full descriptions. But that doesn't happen. Nobody in his right mind would want to cut off the supply of magical nifties that we bring to town."

"This Emperor isn't in his right mind," Anderson points out.

"But everybody else is. Let Waxman panic if he wants to. We finish our business and we clear out tomorrow afternoon as scheduled. You want to go home now, either of you, then go home, but if you do, this'll be the last trip across you ever make." It's a point of pride for Mulreany to max out his trading opportunities, even if it means running along the edge occasionally. He has long since become a rich man just on the 12½ percent he gets from Duplessis and Kulikowski's placements of the artifacts he supplies them with, but nevertheless he isn't going to abort the trip simply because Leo Waxman has picked up some goofy rumor. He detests Waxman's cowardice. The risks haven't changed at all, so far as he can see. This job was always dangerous. But the merchants will protect him. It's in their own best interest not to sell the golden geese to the imperial cops.

When they get back to the hotel, the innkeeper grins smarmily at them out of his cubicle next to the stable. "You sell a lot of pots and pans today?"

"Pretty good business, yes," Mulreany allows.

An avid gleam shines in the lone eye. "Look, you sell me something, hear? I give you a dozen girls, I give you a barrel of fine wine, I give you any damn thing you want, but you let me have one of the magic things, you know what I mean?"

"Gods be my witness, we are but ordinary merchants and let there be an end on this foolishness!" Mulreany says testily, thickening his yokel accent almost to the point of incoherence. "Why do you plague us this way? Would you raise a false charge of sorcery down on innocent men?" The innkeeper raises his hands placatingly, but Mulreany sails right on: "By the gods, I will bring action against you for defaming us, do you not stop this! I will take you to the courts for these slanders! I will say that you knowingly give lodging to men you think are sorcerers, hoping to gain evil goods from them! I will—I will—"

He halts, huffing and puffing. The innkeeper, retreating fast, begs Mulreany's forgiveness and vows never to suggest again that they are anything but what they claim to be. Would the good merchants care for some pleasant entertainment in their room tonight, very reasonable price? Yes, the good merchants would, as a matter of fact. For a single silver argenteus the size of a dime Mulreany is able to arrange a feast of apples and figs and melons, grilled fish, roasted lamb stuffed with minced doves and artichokes, and tangy resinated wine from Crete, along with a trio of Circassian dancing girls to serve them during the meal and service them afterward. It's very late by the time he finally gets to sleep, and very early when half a dozen huge shaggy Bulgarian Guardsmen come bashing into his room and pounce on him.

The bastard has sold him to the Emperor, it seems. That must have been him in the bazaar at lunchtime, then, watching them go in and out of the fancy shops. Thwarted in his dreams of wangling a nice Swiss Army knife for himself, or at least a fifth of Courvoisier, he has whistled up the constables by way of getting even.

There's no sign of Anderson and Schmidt. They must have wriggled through their windows at the first sound of intruders and scrambled down the drainpipe and at this moment are hightailing it for the interface, Chicago-bound. But for Mulreany there's a cell waiting in the dungeon of the imperial palace.

He doesn't get a very good look at the palace, just one awesome glimpse in the moment of his arrival: white marble walls inlaid with medallions of onyx and porphyry, delicate many-windowed towers of dizzying height, two vast courtyards lined by strips of immaculately tended shrubbery stretching off to left and right, with crystalline reflecting pools, narrow as daggers, running down their middles.

Then a thick, smelly hood is pulled down over his head and for a long while he sees nothing further. They pick him up and haul him away down some long corridor. Eventually he hears the sound of a great door being swung back; and then he feels the bruising impact of being dropped like a sack of potatoes onto a stone floor.

Mulreany remains weirdly calm. He's furious, of course, but what good is getting into a lather? He's too upset to let himself get upset. He's a gone goose and he knows it, and it pisses him off immensely, but there isn't a damned thing he can do to save himself. Maybe they'll burn him or maybe, if he's lucky, he'll be beheaded, but either way they can only do it to him once. And there's no lawyer in town who can get him off and no court of appeals to complain to. His only salvation now is a miracle. But he doesn't believe in miracles. The main thing he regrets is that a schmuck like Waxman is home free in Chicago right now and he's not.

"WHY DOES THE SORCERY FIRE COME so often and take the city away?"

He lies there for what feels like hours. They took his watch away when they tied his wrists together, and in any case he wouldn't be able to see it with this hood on, but he knows that the day is moving along and in a matter of hours the interface between the Empire and Chicago is going to close. So even if they don't behead him he's going to be stranded here, the dumbest fate a crosser can experience. The ropes that encircle his wrists start to chafe his skin, and he feels nauseated by the increasingly stale, moist air within the hood covering his face.

Eventually he dozes: sleeps, even. Then he wakes suddenly, muddle-headed, not knowing where he is at first, feeling a little feverish, and starving, besides; he's been cooped up in here, he figures, 12 or 18 hours, or even longer than that. The interface certainly has closed by now. Stranded. Stranded. You goddamned idiot, he thinks.

Footsteps, finally. People coming. A lot of them.

They pull him to his feet, yank the hood off, untie his wrists. He sees that he's in a big square stone room with a high ceiling and no windows. On all sides of him stand guardsmen in terrific Arabian Nights uniforms: golden turbans, baggy scarlet pantaloons, purple silk sashes, blousy green tunics with great flaring shoulder pads. Each of them carries a scimitar big enough to cut an ox in half at a single stroke. Right before him is a trio of cold-eyed older men in the crimson robes of court officials.

They've brought him a hard crust of bread and some peppery gruel. He gobbles it as if it's five-star-quality stuff. Then the chilliest looking of the officials pokes him in the belly with an ornate wooden staff and says, "Where are you from?"

"Ireland," Mulreany says, improvising quickly. Ireland's a long way away. They probably don't know much more about it here than they do about Mars.

The interrogator is unfazed. "Speak to me in the language of your

country, then," he says calmly.

Mulreany is utterly innocent of Gaelic. But he suspects that they are too. "Erin go bragh!" he says. "Sean connery! Eamon de valera! Up the rebels, macushlah!"

There are frowns, and then a lengthy whispered conference among the three officials. Mulreany is unable to catch a single word of it. Then the hood is roughly pulled down over his head and everybody leaves, and once more he is left alone for a long hungry time that feels like about a day and a half. Finally he hears footsteps again, and the same bunch returns, but this time they have with them a huge wild-eyed man with long, flowing, yellow hair who is wearing rawhide leggings and a bulky woolen cloak fastened across the breast by a big metal brooch made of interlocked flaring loops. He looks very foreign indeed.

"Here is a countryman of yours," the chilly-faced court official informs Mulreany. "Speak with him. Tell him where in Ireland you are from, and name your lineage."

Mulreany, frowning, ponders what to do. After a time the newcomer unleashes a string of crackling gibberish, utterly incomprehensible to Mulreany, and folds his arms and waits for a reply.

"Shannon yer shillelagh, me leprechaun," Mulreany offers earnestly, appealing to the Irishman with his eyes for mercy and understanding. "God bless St. Paddy! Faith and begorrah, is it known t'ye where they'd be selling the Guinness in this town?"

Looking not at all amused, the other says in thick-tongued Greek, "This man is no Irishman," and goes stalking out.

They threaten him with torture if he won't tell them where he really comes from. He's cooked either way, it seems. Tell the truth and go to the block, or keep his mouth shut and have it opened for him by methods he'd rather not think about. But he knows his imperial law. The Emperor in person is the final court of appeal for all high crimes. Mulreany demands then and there to be taken before His Majesty for judgment.

"We will do that," says the frosty-faced one. "As soon as you admit that you're from Chicago."

"What if I don't?"

He makes disagreeable racking gestures.

"But you'll take me to him if I do?"

"Most certainly we will. But only if you swear you are from Chicago. If you are not from Chicago, you die."

If you are not from Chicago you die? It doesn't make any sense. But what does he have to lose? One way they'll rack him for sure, the other there's at least a chance. It's worth the gamble.

"I am from Chicago, yes," Mulreany says.

They let him wash himself up and give him some more bread and gruel, and then they take him to the throne room, which is about nine miles long and six miles high, with dozens of the ferocious Arabian Nights guardsmen everywhere and cloth-of-gold on the walls and thick, red carpeting on the floor. Two of the guardsmen shove him forward to the middle of the great room, and there, studying him with an intent frown as though he is looking at the Ambassador from Mars, is the Emperor Basil III.

Mulreany has never seen an emperor before. Or wanted to. He comes over twice a year, does his business, goes back where he came from. It's merchants and craftsmen he comes here to see, not emperors. But there's no doubt in his mind that this is His Nibs. The emperor is a trim, compact little man who looks to be about 99 years old; his skin has the texture of fine vellum, and his expression is mild and benign, except for his eyes, which are dark and glossy and burn with the sort of fire that it takes to maintain yourself as absolute tyrant of a great empire for 40 or 50 years. He is dressed surprisingly simply, in a white silk tunic and flaring green trousers, but there is a golden circlet on his brow and he wears on his chest a many-sided gold pendant, suspended from a heavy chain of the same metal, that bears the unmistakable crossed-thunderbolt symbol of the imperial dynasty inlaid upon it in lapis lazuli. Standing just to his right is a burly florid-looking man of about 40, imposing and almost regal of presence, garbed in an absurdly splendid black robe trimmed with ermine. Dangling from his hand, as casually as if it were a tennis racquet, is the great scepter of the realm, a thick rod of jade bound in gold, which, as Mulreany is aware, marks this man as the High Thekanotis of the Empire, that is to say, the prime minister, the grand vizier, the second-in-command.

There is a long, long, long silence. Then finally the Emperor says, in a thin, faint voice that seems to come from ten thousand miles away, "Well, are you a sorcerer or aren't you?"

Mulreany draws a deep breath. "Not at all, your majesty. A merchant is what I am, nothing but a merchant."

"Would you put your right hand on the holy altar and say that?"

"Absolutely, your majesty."

"He denies that he is a sorcerer," the Emperor says pleasantly to the High Thekanotis. "Make note of that." There is another great silence. Then the Emperor gives Mulreany a quick lopsided smile and says, "Why does the sorcery fire come so often and take the city away?"

"I don't know," Mulreany says. "It just does."

"And when it does, people like you step through the sorcery fires and move among us bringing the magical things to sell."

"Yes, your majesty. That's so." Why pretend otherwise?

"Where do you come from?"

"Chicago," Mulreany says. "Chicago, Illinois."

"Chicago," the Emperor repeats. "What do you know of this place?" he asks the High Thekanotis. The High Thekanotis scowls. Shrugs. It's obvious that he finds this whole event irritating and is already eager to ship Mulreany off to the executioner. But the Emperor's curiosity must be satisfied. "Tell me about your Chicago. Is it a great city?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"In what part of the world is it to be found?"

"America," says Mulreany. "In northern Illinois." What the hell, he has nothing to lose. "On the shore of Lake Michigan. We have Wisconsin to the north of us and Indiana to the east."

"Ah," the Emperor says, smiling as if that makes everything much clearer. "And what is this Chicago like? Describe it for me."

"Well," Mulreany says, "it has, oh, two or three million people. Maybe even more." The Emperor blinks in surprise and the High Thekanotis glares with such ferocity that Mulreany wonders whether he has made a slip of the tongue and used the word for billion instead. But three million would be amazing enough, he decides. The imperial capital is one of the biggest cities of this era and its population is probably around half a million, tops. "We have some of the tallest buildings in the world, like the Sears Tower, which I think is 110 stories high, and the Marina Towers, which are pretty big too, and some others. We have great restaurants, any kind of food you might want. The Art Institute is a really fine museum and the Museum of Science and Industry is pretty special too."

He pauses, wondering what else to say. As long as he keeps talking they aren't going to cut his head off. Does the Emperor want to hear about the dinosaurs at the Field Museum? The Aquarium? The Planetarium? He might be impressed by some statistics about O'Hare Airport, but Mulreany isn't sure he has the vocabulary for that. Then he notices that the Emperor is starting to look a little strange—turning pale, rocking weirdly back and forth on the balls of his feet. His eyes have taken on a really odd look, a mixture of profound cunning and utter wackiness.

"You must take me there," the Emperor says, whispering fiercely. "When you return to your city, take me with you and show me everything. Everything."

The High Thekanotis makes a choking sound and his florid face turns an even brighter red. Mulreany is aghast, too. No imperial citizen has ever come across into Chicago, not even one. They are all terrified of the sorcery fire, and they have no way of seeing beyond the interface anyway to know that there's another city out there.

But is the old man serious? The old man is crazy, Mulreany reminds himself.

"It would be an honor and a privilege, your majesty," he says grandly, "to show you Chicago someday. I would greatly enjoy the opportunity."

Continued on page 80



"Selene"

By Gabriel Edson · Illustration by Scott Grimando

LOVE AND OBSESSION CAN LIE SO CLOSE TOGETHER THAT THEY OVERLAP LIKE THE FEATHERS OF A SWAN'S WING.

"Selene, I'm home."

I step into the dining room, where my wife is bent over her tapestry frame, in nearly the same position I left her this morning. She doesn't sleep very much. She's stitching a flight of swans across sapphire-blue threads. Maybe she'll hang this one in the hall across from the other flight tapestry. She turns her head to let me kiss her cheek, but I can see that her unusually dark eyes are still fixed on the stitching. She must be in the middle of delicate work. Her skin is cool and soft as silk, pale as milk. Her pale blonde hair is drawn back into a braid to keep it out of the way.

She is surrounded by swans already. There are paintings and woven hangings and little white swans embroidered on the hems of almost everything. Swans flying against an orange sunset sky, swans admiring themselves in green water, swans sitting on nests and preening themselves. Most of them are my wife's creations. She's amazingly artistic, of course. I always wanted her to try selling some of her work, but she was never interested in that. But she didn't make all of them. The figurines nesting and swimming on various shelves and windowsills are, for the most part, gifts. People love that Selene is so easy to shop for.

The pounding on the stairs overhead announces the arrival of our 10-year-old daughter, Aileen. Aileen looks just like her mother, except for her smile. Aileen is always laughing, always teasing and happy. Her mother is beautiful but dignified, like royalty. Aileen's smile is all mine.

"Hi, Daddy!" She flings herself into my arms with a mad abandon, and I spin her around until she squeals.

"Hi, pumpkin." I press a kiss to the top of her head as I set her on her feet. I head into the kitchen, Aileen following me like a puppy. It's our ritual each night to talk and have some together time while I cook dinner.

"What are we having?" Her almost-black eyes are dancing with excitement, and there's a smudge of something gray across one cheek.

"Oh ... liver and onions," I tell her, sticking my head into the fridge.

"Eeew!" I don't have to take my head out of the fridge to know the face she's making.

"Frog legs and snails?"

"Eeew, Daddy!"

"How about salmon and salad then?" I emerge from the refrigerator with dinner; she shrugs.

"Same old, same old."

She's right, of course, but allowances have to be made. Selene's digestion is always upset by meat, except for fish, and green leafy vegetables are full of vitamins. "What did you do at school today, angel?"

She plops herself down onto the tall barstool I bought for her years ago, her almost-black eyes dancing. "We made sculptures in art class today! I tried to make a swan for Mommy."

There's a funny clenching in the bottom of my stomach suddenly, and I'm a bit dizzy. I lean on the counter until it passes. The gray smudge on Aileen's cheek must he clay.

"It didn't work, though." A little frown touches her features. "The neck kept breaking. I made a duck instead."

"That's OK, honey," I said, drying my hands on a hand towel that bore a row of embroidered swans along the hem. "I think we have enough swans in the house already. I'd love to have your duck in the house. Better yet: next time why don't you try a kitty?"

"Daddy ... ?" Her voice is hesitant, and she chews on her lower lip the way she always does when she asks a question she isn't sure she should. "Don't you like swans?"

I turn my attention to the fish I'm rubbing with herbs, to my own fingers and the cold flesh beneath them. It is a delicate moment, and I'm not sure how to answer. I'm not sure, for that matter, of what the answer is. Selene and I have never argued in front of Aileen ... as a matter of fact, we haven't argued for years. I don't think I am ready to tell my daughter how truly tired of those giant white birds I have become.

Besides ... some day, years from now, it may make the difference between seeing or never seeing my little girl again. Will she ever forget—or forgive—if I tell her in an unconsidered moment that I may have come to hate swans?

I smile at her, putting all the love I have into that smile. "Yes, pumpkin, of course I like swans. I love swans. But I think we have enough of them just now." Please, God. We don't need another one.

Her face clears and she begins chattering on about the rest of her day. She's such a smart girl, she can do anything she wants with the rest of her life. She could be a doctor, or an engineer. As I toss the salad, I hear Selene's box of embroidery thread open and shut as she changes colors.

It takes me about half an hour to put dinner together, and the fish cooks for 40 minutes. I've done it every day for so many years that I don't really have to think about it. As I begin to take the dishes out of the cupboard, rattling them against one another as I hand them to Aileen, I hear Selene moving around in the dining room. When Aileen and I carry the dinner and dishes into the room, Selene has laid the gray tablecloth (edged, of course, in a flight of white birds) across the table.

I give the hlessing, and we begin to eat. For the first 10 minutes of the meal, as always, silence reigns. I see Aileen's eyes darting to the clock positioned over the bay windows, waiting for the time when she can speak. Selene eats with a refined delicacy; with her manners and her aristocratic bones, I've always thought she looks just like a princess when she eats.

Finally, the 10 minutes are up. Aileen lets out a giant breath, as if she were a punctured balloon, and smiles at her mother. "Mommy, I want to tell you about the story Mrs. Andreas read to us today. I knew you would like it because it had swans in it."

Do Selene's eyes flicker over to mine for a moment? I glance over, thinking I've seen them move but when I look at her she is focused on our daughter. Aileen's face brightens into a wide smile, delighted to have her mother's complete attention.

"It was about this bad witch who put a spell on seven brothers and turned them into swans. They turned back into people when the sun went down, and they flew away when they were swans. And they had one sister. And she followed them every day, and a good fairy told her how to break the spell and turn her brothers back into people all the time. She had to weave a magic cloak for them!"

My eyes snap to Selene's face, and her eyes dart quickly away. A hard flush blooms high on her ivory cheekbones. My heart thuds uncomfortably.

"And she couldn't talk or write or sing or make any sounds while she worked ... and a prince found her living out in the woods and fell in love with her—even though she couldn't talk to him. But the bad witch made some of the people in town think that she was a witch, even though she wasn't. And they told her she had to speak and say she wasn't a witch if she wasn't. And she wouldn't. Because it would break the spell she was working on. And then her brothers would die!"

She glances from me to her mother and back again, clearly hoping we are as enthralled by the story as she is. I do my best to look interested, but my heart is going a mile a minute. Why this story? Why now? Why is Selene looking like that? My face is burning, my eyes feel hot and dry.

"So she didn't say anything, and they built up a stake to burn her on, and just then the seven swans flew past, and she threw the magic cloak over them! But she didn't have time to finish it all the way, so her youngest brother had to stay part swan forever and ever!" She finishes with a breathless flourish, grinning.

"Sometimes, magic is like that," Selene says, so softly that I almost can't understand her words. "Sometimes, you can never take all of the swan out of somebody."

I stare at her, and suddenly I'm flushed with the stirring of panic. Is she sending some sort of message to our daughter, leaving a secret seed to germinate as she grows? What is she up to?

"Are you making a magic cloak, Mommy?" Aileen's sudden question seems to take Selene by surprise as much as it does me. She draws back as if our daughter is blazing hot, or contagious, jerking her head and her hands back so quickly that her silverware clatters to the floor. The hectic flush has left her cheeks, leaving them as white as a swan's wing.

"Is that what you're making? To fly away?" Aileen's eyes are wide, guileless, and still filled with the wonder of the story. What an amazing, unhelievable trick it would seem to her, to pull on a magic cloak and become a human—or a swan—in the blink of an eye. Aileen is pointing at the tapestry frame.

But it's Selene who draws my eye: the frozen, horrified look on Selene's snowy face, the *guilty* look on her face. Because somehow, by the special telepathy that children sometimes have, Aileen has guessed a truth that hasn't even crossed my mind. Selene isn't weaving her cloak on the tapestry frame—no, that's just another tapestry, that's just a cover-up for the work that she does while I'm at the office, something so that I won't suspect the truth. Somewhere in the house, there's the start of a second cloak. A new cloak. So that she can fly away.

"Of course not, honey," I tell Aileen, smiling at her through cold lips. "How could Mommy make a magic cloak? She's just making another tapestry for the wall, aren't you, dear?" The smile I shoot at Selene is freezingly false, and her eyes, those deep, dark pools that

"You expect gratitude, when you've

a man could swim in, do not smile back. She has the look of a doe trapped in headlights.

Aileen glances between the two of us, sensing that all is not right but unsure of what it is. She twiddles her fork in her salmon as Selene reaches down for her own dropped silverware. I bring a forkful of salad to my mouth and chew. I can't taste it.

We finish dinner in silence, and Aileen goes into the living room to watch television, watching talking dogs and little girls pretending to be superheroes. For a moment, Aileen believed that fairy tales could be real, that her mother could be making a magic cloak and that it was possible for swans to become human beings. Am I being wrong to disabuse her of the idea? Is it better or worse for her to live in my world than for her to take a step into the world I pulled her mother out of 10 years ago?

Selene doesn't say anything when I get up and leave the room, only silently follows me, about a dozen paces behind. She knows where I'm going, and she knows what I'll find there. Still, somewhere in the churning mess of my stomach, I hope it's not true. I want to believe that after all these years, she loves me. How can she be willing to fly away? But the memory of that stark, guilty look puts a lie to my hope. At the center of my gut, a kernel of anger blooms.

I've taken care of this woman for 10 years! I never asked her to get a job—not that she could—or even help around the house! All she does is make stupid swans fly all over our house, and what do I ask in return for feeding her, putting a roof over her head, giving her a beautiful daughter, and taking care of her for 10 years? Only that she love me in return, even just a little! And this is what I get!

I pull the rope that lowers the attic stairs, push open the trapdoor, and step into the dry, cobwebby darkness. There are only two tiny windows in the attic, and at this time of night, they shed no light. I pull the string attached to the lightbulb in the ceiling and am rewarded with a harsh flood of white light. The attic is crowded with trunks, boxes, and bags of things we no longer use but haven't the heart to throw away ... but it's easy to find what I'm looking for. Years ago, I put the iron-bound oak cask in the far corner and standing next to it, in a newly cleared space, is a loom.

Stretched on that loom is a palely glowing white cloth, glimmering even in the ugly, modern light thrown by the unshielded fixture. Each separate thread seems to be composed of silver light, gently strung together on the loom. It's beautiful, as beautiful as the finished twin that sleeps in the cask beside it. The sight of it fills me with rage, and I turn to her. I ball up my fists. I know that, for the first time in our marriage, I want to hit her—no, I want to beat her bloody.

She's crying, hands pressed to her face to muffle the sounds, but her wet, black eyes are still visible over the tips of her fingers. She's staring at me—silently begging for something—but it does not make me feel sympathetic. It makes me angrier.

"Stop that," I say, and my voice is cold and hard. "You did this, don't you dare cry now and act like I'm the bad guy. Stop that noise right now."

She lowers her hands and stands there, fighting her own trembling mouth, the way our daughter does when she knows she's been bad. The fact that she's acting like a 10-year-old does not endear her to me.

"Tell me why, Selene. Why would you do this?"

"B-because," she says, spreading her hands and then clenching them. "I couldn't—bear—the idea that—my daughter would never fly. As I will never fly again."

That shocks me. Again, the surprise is like a punch to the gut. I turn and stare at the half-finished cloak—the magic cloak our daughter wanted, no wonder Selene looked so guilty—and realize that it's for Aileen. It isn't a means for Selene to escape, only a means for her to take my daughter away from me. My heart constricts. They're Aileen's hairs, the threads on the loom, that's what the shimmery thing is made from. She must have been collecting them for years, knowing that she would do this. For years!

Before I know I'm going to do it, I've stepped forward and grabbed her arms and I am shaking her. That white-blonde hair of hers is tumbling all over the place, her pale face has those two red patches on the cheeks again.

"How could you do this? Ten years! I've given you 10 years of my life and you try to steal my daughter? *Ten years!*"

"Ten years of prison!" She screams at me and suddenly her fingers are digging into my arms, her head is no longer flopping backward and forward but pushing her face into mine. "Ten years of imprisonment at your hands, and you expect me to be grateful? What is wrong with you?"

"I love you!" The protest sounds weak, and that makes me angry again. "I took care of you!"

"You kidnapped me!" She is still screaming, and her fingernails are biting into my arms. "Raped me! Kept me imprisoned in this *house*, in that *box!*" A shaking finger points at the cask in the corner. "You expect gratitude, when you've taken the sky from me? You want me to thank you for strapping weights to my feet, for trapping me in this body that you use as you wish?"

"Selene!" She can't mean that! She's just angry that I found her loom, that I know she's trying to steal Aileen from me. What good will it do Aileen to be able to fly? Will it put food on the table, will it get her through college? "Be reasonable! You know that I have been good to you! Raped you? How can you say such things? I've never—*never*—pressed you when you said no!" As a matter of fact, I don't remember Selene ever *saying* no, so what does that tell you? She couldn't have been very unhappy!

"You don't love me." Her voice is dry now, wooden, and she lets go of my arms and steps away from me. She wraps her arms around herself. "You own me."

I turn away from her because I don't want her to see me cry. Her words hurt so much, so goddamned much. If she could fly, would that make her happier? Would she fly around all day instead of sewing and painting swans all over the place? Would she eat weeds and bugs out of the pond in the park instead of eating the food I provide her? What if someone shot her, has she even thought of that?

Something occurs to me then, something utterly stupid and yet somehow magical. It's a poem that was printed on a T-shirt I used to own. It had a herd of horses running across it—was it horses? It wasn't swans?—and printed in this rainbow cursive script was this little verse: "If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was."

It's like a light coming on in my head. Surely, if I give her back her cloak, she'll realize I love her. She will know how much I trust her, and she can spend her days ... flying, or whatever swans do. She'll realize she loves me, too.

I don't want to do it, though. I went though so much to get that cloak. I lay alongside that riverbank for weeks, creeping closer.... I've worked so hard. I've built my whole life around her. What if she doesn't come back? Does that mean she was right, and all this time she was just ... a prisoner? Would it mean she doesn't really love me?

I can't think like that. I can't doubt our love, or the last 10 years become

taken the sky from me?"

a terrible, tragic joke. I unbutton the top button of my shirt and loosen my tie to take off the key I wear all the time. I don't look at her, but I hear her gasp. I kneel down by the cask, unlock it, and there it is. I've forgotten how beautiful it is, snowy white, a creation of fine, shimmering fabric and blinding feathers. It seems to breathe out a soft light of its own.

"Oh, please, David, don't hurt it," she whispers, and my chest clenches again. I turn to her with it cradled in my arms like a baby,

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Alephestra

By Bruce Holland Rogers
Illustration by Sheila Rayyan

A paradox to stun the gods: Though life can be quite ugly, it's never less than beautiful.

THE GODS USED TO DECORATE THE night sky with mortals they would honor or punish, save or condemn. Cassiopeia sits upon a heavenly throne, immortalized for her beauty. Yet for her vanity, the sky revolves and turns her on her head. Castor and Pollux must dwell at times in the underworld, but Jupiter so admired their brotherly love that on some nights they look down from the sky where all is perfection. The young hunter, Arcas, circles the pole star and is forever about to slay the bear that he thinks is charging him. He did not know, and will never know, that the beast rushes not to attack, but to embrace him. She is his mother, Callisto, altered by a jealous curse. To prevent the shame and horror of Callisto's murder, Jupiter hurled son and mother into the heavens where the fatal thrust will never come, but where we must see poor Arcas every night and be reminded of the thing he is always about to do.

So it is with other constellations, stars, and heavenly lights. Mortals beyond counting or remembering have gone from this sphere to that higher one.

One time, though, the transformation was in the other direction. Long ago, the world had not the one moon we see now, but two. The second, smaller moon was called Alephestra, though some say that she wasn't truly the second moon, but the first. She was a goddess, but one of modest station and powers, or else she was a titan, or some being even more ancient. She never visited the Earth. Instead she looked upon the blue world from the distance and praised it. The clouds were beautiful to her. Oceans gleamed in the sun. Although she had seen neither leaf nor grove, she would praise trees for their beauty. Although she had never seen mortal man or woman, she loved the stories that gods told about them.

For a long time, the little moon's talk amused Jupiter. He would ask her to describe the deer, the flowers, and the new-plowed fields of Earth. She told him about the rainbow colors of fish scales even though she had never seen rainbows or fish, and he smiled with what may have been indulgence. When she compared the smell of a wet bear to the odor of a man wearing a woolen cloak and told Jove that a bear on its hind legs in the rain was very hard to tell apart from a man, he nodded and smiled a different sort of smile. When she said that flower nectar was like the nectar of Olympus, he laughed. Alephestra knew that his pleasure was sometimes at her expense, but she had no way to know which of her impressions were correct and which were mistaken. Besides, whatever details she might have misunderstood, she remained certain that the Earth was more wondrous than the heavens. And one way or another, her descriptions and pronouncements always pleased Jupiter.

One day, however, the old lightning hurler was in a bad mood. Some mortal maiden had refused his advances, and he sat among the stars, glowering at Earth. When Alephestra glided near, she saw the way his face was twisted. Jupiter in a bad mood was dangerous, and anyone who could would have avoided him. But Alephestra's orbit was fixed. She could neither alter her path nor hurry past him. Instead of drifting by in silence, she tried to please him. She began to sing about the sacred groves and the honor that mortals paid to trees.

Jupiter commanded her to be silent. The world of mortals was nothing like what she imagined. Mortals might esteem a sacred grove here or there, but they despoiled whole forests to make pasture for their sheep or for firewood. Whatever beauty there was on the Earth was fleeting. Grasp mortal loveliness as you might here or there, it would elude you somewhere else. And all that was beautiful on Earth fell at last to rot and ruin. The world below was not worthy of song.

Perhaps Alephestra could not hear him as she sang. She kept singing.

Jupiter is not a god of second chances. Annoyed, he sent Alephestra hurtling toward the Earth. As she fell, she took the shape of a woman. If she could not stop singing the praises of the imperfect world, let her see it for herself. Like a fallen star, the moon struck the sea with a thunderclap and the hiss of steam. All around her was blackness as she settled to the bottom of the abyss. Truly, Earth was not

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A Fault Against the DEAD

There are some pretty awful people out there in the world, and some pretty nice ones too. It stands to reason that this equation remains the same in the next world as well.

You can't keep dead people happy all the time.

Thursday night I was walking on the beach, and about five ghosts were following me, one friendly, two whiners, one halfway on its way to somewhere else, and the last one potentially a client.

"Julia," said the friendly one, a dead guy named Roger I've known for eight of the nine years I've been a counselor to dead people (talk about a job whose rewards are intangible), "are you getting enough sleep?"

"Probably not," I said. I flumped down on the cold sand, lay flat on my back, and waved my arms up and down to make a sand angel amid the footprints of people who'd come to the beach by day. The breathing hush of waves coming in and going out, the shifting grains against my back, the coolness under me, and the scent of sea, with a faint undertone of something small and dead a short distance away, all combined to lull me. Roger was right. I needed sleep. But it was exam week at community college, I had been cramming for four nights in a row, and there was more ghost activity than usual. "I won't get much tonight, either. I have an anthro exam tomorrow to cram for. Minnie and Hiram have too many complaints. Nothing I say seems to help."

Minnie and Hiram had gone, moping, down to the water, where they let wavelets wash through their ankles and stared glumly out to sea. The moon shone through them; they were translucent, like thin green jade. If there

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman • Illustration by Web Bryant



had been any way to ditch them, I would have taken it. But, though they hadn't been able to figure out what was holding them in this world and solve it so they could move on, they were startlingly resourceful when it came to tracking me down and torturing me.

"They don't want to be helped. They just like you." Roger drifted down to float above the sand near me. He had been a ghost long enough to look like someone specific. I wondered if he looked like who he had been. Some ghosts didn't. A lot of them could posthumously turn into their dream selves, select an appearance they thought suited them better than the one they had been born into. I was totally freaked out the first time I saw someone I knew die and emerge from her mouth as someone else.

Some of the people I saw weren't even dead yet, and there, other rules applied.

Roger was a good-looking ghost. Also, he wore clothes. Some of the dead acted like death was a nudist colony. I was still a little frisson about that, especially about the naked guy ghosts, when I could tell whether they liked me or didn't. They enjoyed being able to get excited by live women without the women knowing, and sometimes it took a while for them to figure out I could see them and they should mind their manners. A lot of them didn't care. I guess, why should they?

Still, if they didn't care about my feelings, I didn't take them on as clients.

With Hiram and Minnie, it was hard to tell if they cared. They whined a lot. They talked in my ears when I was trying to read my textbooks, and when Minnie went into Mother mode, she drove me crazy. Still, there were a few small flickers of what looked like affection in our relationship.

At least they wore clothes.

I stopped flopping around. Sand angels didn't give a person the same satisfaction as snow angels. You couldn't tell from the outline what a person had been trying for.

"So who are you?" I asked the fourth ghost, who looked like lavender jade and drifted in the air about a foot from my head. I couldn't tell much about her; she was too new to have distinct features. She looked small, though. A kid ghost.

I had problems with kid ghosts. It was kid ghosts who sent me to the mental hospital for five years.

She didn't say anything. She just watched me with her black olive-pit eyes in their shadowed caverns.

I sat up and shook sand out of my coat sleeves. "I can't help you if you don't give me anything to work with."

She flickered and vanished.

Whew. Another bullet dodged.

"So what's your story?" I asked Ghost Five, more a colored, internally lighted smear on the dark sky than a person.

It wavered like the Northern Lights. I heard a faint wind-chime sound, then a deep bell bong.

"Great," I muttered. The half-there ghosts were sometimes dream selves and didn't need help. As soon as their bodies woke up, they'd disappear. I wasn't sure Ghost Five was one of those. You couldn't always tell. Some of the real dead spoke other languages. I hoped there were other me's out there who could help them. Well, I'd met one other guy, Nick, who saw almost as many ghosts as I did, but he and I didn't get along.

Music as a language was a big problem for me. I had a tin ear. "Roger?"

Roger went to Half-There and walked through it. He came shuddering out the other side, his face stained purple and pink, his clothes writhing. "Yech!" He flumped down onto the sand beside me and shook.

"A dreamer?"

"No, he's dead."

"What does he need?"

The stains faded from Roger's translucent face, leaving his skin his more usual light brown. "Forgiveness," he muttered. "I couldn't forgive him, though. He's polluted with the deaths of others."

God, I hated those guys. I could do it, though. The sooner the better, probably. Thin down the ghost herd and then go study.

I stood up. "OK, ghost guy. Here's what I can do for you."

The smear wavered some more. Why couldn't he have been a dream?

"Walk into me and give me your sins. Walk out of me and leave them behind, and then you can go on. If this isn't what you want, please leave me alone. I have other things to do."

Half of him shifted up and the other half circled, rippled, pulsed. I stretched out my arms as though I were making a sky angel. The ghost flowed suddenly toward me and then into me, and then my stomach clenched. A river of blood, an orchestra of screams, sick hot excitement, the cold wracking shudders afterward, the irresistible need to find more of other people's pain to taste, oh, God, I hated these guys. My stomach churned, my forehead burned, sweat burst out all over my body. He slid out of me, washed clean and pale and confused.

I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you. You did it because you couldn't find anything else that worked. You learned some lesson here. It happened for a reason. (Oh, God, what reason could there be? Yet this sort of thing kept happening. If I believed there was a reason—I needed to believe there was a reason. Otherwise I'd end up back in the room where you could bounce off the walls and not hurt yourself. There had to be a reason. I just didn't know what it was.) You gave others lessons—you evil, sick fuck—no, no, focus, Julia. You are done here. You are forgiven. Please move on to your next lesson. Please be free of what hurt you in this life. Please find love and joy in the next.

Music as a language was a big problem for me. I HAD A TIN EAR.

He shot up into the sky and was gone.

"Is he gone?" I asked, even though I knew he was.

"He's gone," said Roger.

I screamed. I dropped to my knees and pounded on the sand. I screamed again, then lay with my face to the ground and screamed a third time, as loud as I could into the sand, vomiting up the things that ghost had done in his life, cleaning his taste out of my mouth.

"Miss? Miss?"

Uh-oh.

I clenched my fists and pushed myself up.

"Are you all right?"

He was alive. He wore a big puffy dark jacket and dark jeans and knee-high rubber boots. On his head, a pale knitted cap; on his hands, dark gloves. His face was obscured by thick glasses. Even if the light weren't solely moon and stars I don't know if I could have figured out what he looked like.

He knelt, reached for me.

I scrambled away. I had forced the last ghost's sick acts mostly out of my brain, but a residue remained, the way it always did. I could

remember being the guy, or I could remember what he had done. When I remembered what he had done, I took the stance of his victims. If I remembered being the guy, I stained myself with his inescapable desire for power over something, anything, preferably something that would whimper and quiver when he poked it.

Through a haze of killer memories, I looked at this live guy and thought: Killer.

"Miss?" said this mummy-wrapped guy. "I don't mean you any harm."

What my last ghost had always said to the women he managed to separate from everything they knew or could cling to for safety. Had always meant, up until the moment he harmed his victims, because he couldn't let himself know ahead of time what he really wanted and intended to do, not and function. He had to pretend it wasn't happening, had never happened, until it did.

The other kind, the ones who had no consciences and no regrets, they must go somewhere else. I didn't have to deal with those.

Puffy guy stood slowly. "I just wanted to see if you were OK," he said in a hurt voice.

"Sure." My voice was hoarse from all the screaming. "I come down here to scream because I figure it won't bother my neighbors." I could hardly hear myself, my voice was so thin. "Thanks anyway. I'm kind of frazzled."

"Frazzled," he said, an amused note in his voice.

Roger walked through him. "Julia, get out of here."

I climbed to my feet, stood swaying. From the tone of Roger's voice, I knew this guy must be a wrong one, too. What were the odds?

What chance did I have of getting away from this guy? He was a head taller than I was, and I was exhausted from too little sleep, too much studying, too much greasy food, and too much murder.

Hiram and Minnie had drifted up from the water's edge. Minnie heard Roger and flashed between me and the stranger. "Run, Julia," she said.

Run? Fat lot of good that would do me.

Hiram streaked across the beach. "I'll rouse Nick!" he cried as he disappeared. Nick was one of the few people I knew who could also see ghosts, and he might listen to Hiram. He might try to help me. We didn't like each other, so I wasn't sure that would work.

Which direction should I run?

"Frazzled," I repeated. I walked past the guy, heading toward my car. If I could get most of the way there—

If I ran, he'd bring me down. An image of a lion leaping to bite a gazelle on the neck flashed through my brain. Hah. Gazelle. As if. I glanced sideways at the guy. Lion. As if.

If I pretended I didn't know what he was up to, maybe I'd have time to collect myself, restore my energy. I pulled a granola bar out of my coat pocket, ripped off the wrapper, and took a bite. I pulled a water bottle out of my other pocket, shook sand off it, unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. My throat felt better.

He followed, weaving beside me on the sand.

"See, what happens when you die," I said, "you suddenly stop being able to forget all the horrible things you did while you were alive. You have to live with them or find someone like me to help you ditch them. You know? When I die I don't think I'll have that problem, because as far as I know, I haven't done any horrible things to anyone else, just myself. Then again, memory is so tricky. I suppose I could have done awful things and just made myself forget."

"What are you talking about?" asked the guy.

"Julia, what are you talking about?" Roger asked at the same time. "Why aren't you running? This man has evil intentions."

"I know, but I'm too tired."

"Huh?" said stalker guy.

I ate more granola bar, washed it down with water. I was feeling better.

Minnie and Roger flanked me, Roger mixing edges with stalker guy because stalker guy was walking pretty close beside me. "Julia," Minnie said, "Julia, don't join us."

"It's not my idea, but you know, sometimes things just happen." I wished I felt as calm about all this as I sounded.

The little lavender ghost returned, floated in front of me as I walked. The sand dragged at my feet. Breeze blew past my face, flavored with a faint whiff of woodsmoke from someone's fire. Somewhere, someone was sitting in front of a nice fire in a living room, maybe reading a book and drinking hot coffee or some nice wine. Maybe they had slippers and a fluffy bathrobe on. Maybe there was nothing in the world that worried them.

Lavender danced as she walked, and she walked backward, her dark eye sockets the only features in her face.

"I wish you'd tell me what you want. Maybe I can help you," I said.

"Are you nuts?" asked stalker guy.

"Certifiably. I still have my ID bracelet from the mental hospital in my keepsake box."

"Really?" He sounded intrigued.

"He killed me," said the lavender ghost. "I want to kill him."

"I understand. Of course you want to kill him. You can't, though, probably. I guess it depends on whether you're so angry your rage shifts you into power mode. That happens sometimes. Then you can drive them to hurt themselves or maybe even die, if you try hard enough. But it's a waste of energy, and it drops you into a lower mode of existence next time, as far as I know, which, I have to admit, isn't that far."

"Who are you talking to?" stalker guy asked.

"The ghost of one of your victims."

Roger groaned.

"What?" said stalker guy.

"He hurt me. He hurt me so bad. He put a dirty sock in my mouth so I couldn't cry. I cried anyway, but I couldn't make the noises. He wouldn't stop."

"I'm sorry," I said. "What's your name?"

"Hazel Mindell."

"I'm so sorry, Hazel." We were almost to the parking lot

There were two vehicles in the parking lot: my Mazda Protege, and an overmuscled pickup truck with tall tires and a camper shell.

Sure. Closer to my car, closer to his. Here I was, making his job easy by walking myself to where he wanted me.

Stalker guy grabbed my left arm. "Hazel?" he said. For the first time, he sounded upset.

"Where'd he put you after he killed you?" I asked Hazel.

"Just over there." One arm rose, pointed toward a thick stand of shore pine to the right of the parking lot. I turned my head to look. Short squat trees hunched shoulder to shoulder in the night, their tops cropped and blown back by the constant sea wind. "I was still alive when he took me there. There's a little clear place where one of the trees died. He did things to me there. Even after I was gone."

"Hazel?" said stalker guy.

"How many have you killed?" I asked, then realized it was the wrong question in almost any social situation.

"Seven," Roger told me.

Huh. He could walk through live people and pick up that much detail? I'd seen him walk through people before, but I just assumed it was an accident. I never realized—though heck, I did something similar myself with dead people.

If I survived what was about to happen, though I didn't see how I could, I wanted to ask Roger a lot more questions. Like: could he walk through some of the guys I saw at school? Even though I was years older than most of them, thanks to the unintended detour in life I'd taken courtesy of doctors, drugs, and bad advice, I suspected some of them might like me. I never knew how to approach them, though. The risk of rejection was pretty high with live people. Dead people didn't have as many options. Most of the dead people I'd dealt with liked me. I thought

The stalker guy's hand was tight around my upper arm now, and getting tighter. It hurt. "Hey," I said. "Throttle down."

"What do you know about killing, or Hazel?"

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By Christopher Barzak
Illustration by Chris Cocozza

The Drowned Mermaid

From the sea we came and to the sea we shall return. One way or another.

On the morning after the storm the body of a drowned mermaid was washed ashore. She was curled in an almost S shape, her arms thrown over her head as if to block out the glare of the sun. Her skin was pale, rubbery, and white. The kind of pale that comes from living either beneath the earth or beneath the sea. Her black hair was twisted with ropes of seaweed, and a bruise, golden brown and purple, stained the skin of her right cheek.

Helena found her. She had woken that morning from another dream of her daughter Jordan, from another night of terror and mystery in which she played the lead role. She'd been in a casino this time, after receiving instructions on how to win Jordan back: "Go to the roulette table, place your bet on black 31, walk away from the wheel without collecting your winnings, and believe me," a disembodied voice told her, "you'll win. Walk toward the nearest restroom, but don't go in. A man in a dark suit will meet you by the door. Take his arm. He'll bring you to me."

She'd done as instructed, but as usual never found her daughter. Never won her, never opened the locked safe without tripping the alarm. Or in another situation, she might be fooled into thinking Jordan was behind a certain door. But upon opening it, she would find nothing but a dark, empty room. As in the shell game, Helena could never pick the one under which the con man had hidden the ping-pong ball.



So she had come down to the beach after waking, leaving Paul asleep in bed. The sun had just risen, dappling the waves with light, and gulls screed in the air, circling and diving over the water.

From a distance the mermaid's body looked like driftwood, smooth and round, silhouetted by the morning light. It was only when Helena came closer that she noticed the scales glinting in the light, the thickly muscled tail, and after moving one of the mermaid's arms off of her face, the bulbous eyes, black and damp as olives.

She knelt beside the body and rested her ear against the chilled skin. A sluggish pulse still pumped through those emerald veins: a slow, locomotive beat. Unconscious then, Helena decided. She stood again, turning her head one way and then the other, searching the beach to see if anyone else had ventured down this way yet. There was no one. But that would change soon enough. It was the end of summer. Within an hour the beach would be strewn with bodies laid out for the sun to take. A ritual sacrifice.

Working quickly, she lifted the mermaid's arms and shoulders from underneath and started to drag her. She pulled away from the hissing waves that collapsed under their own weight, turning to foam as they reached the shore. She dragged, then paused to catch her breath, then picked the mermaid up again to go a little farther. And all the while, the mermaid's head lolled on the stalk of her neck, as if it had been broken.

But in this way, they reached home soon enough.

HOME WAS A BEACH HOUSE, PERCHED 40 FEET above the beach on the edge of a cliff, in southern California. It was sleek and modern, filled with furniture that had been fashionable two decades before and had again come into style. There was a deck in back of the house, braced against the cliffside, and when high tide rolled in it resembled a pier, the pilings of the deck's foundation partly submerged in water. The side of the cliff was buried beneath a lumpy shell of boulders, an ad hoc seawall that served to deter any further erosion that might undermine the house's foundation. Helena and Paul had lived there for 15 years, since he took the position teaching history at the university. Before the seawall was built, they had seen whole houses fold in on themselves.

The only problem to emerge since moving here, to a sleepy village by the sea, was that sometimes homeless people or drifters would hole up beneath their deck. They'd stay for a few days or a week, making temporary homes, fleeting as dreams, among the boulders. Then they'd vanish and never be seen again. Helena and Paul never instinctively disliked or feared them. But as Helena once complained, "It's that you can *hear* them down there, whispering, right below your feet."

They never called the police, though. It would have been easy enough to have the drifters removed. But as Helena once pointed out to Paul, who had the phone in hand, ready to dial 911, "What if it were Jordan down there? What if she just needed a place to stay the night?"

Paul had placed the phone back on its cradle, but not without saying, "If she needed a place to stay the night, why wouldn't she call us? Why wouldn't she come home?"

In the past, Helena would have supplied him with reasonable answers to these questions; it had once been a specialty of hers. But by then, most questions that had anything to do with Jordan were unreasonable. As well as inexplicable.

By the time Helena reached the stairs leading up to the back deck, people had started to arrive. They came with surf boards lashed to the tops of their cars, or with children, lathered in sunblock, trudging wearily across the sand.

Helena climbed one step at a time, planting her feet securely before pulling the mermaid up the next step. It took a long time. Sweat beaded on her forehead, then dribbled down into her eyes. She could hear her own breathing, sharp intakes of breath followed by exhausted sighs.

She wished she were younger, not slowed down by midlife. *If I only had more energy,* she thought several times a day, *I could do more.* As it was, she spent most of her days barely able to keep up with the house. Every time she turned around, there was a loose tile in the linoleum, or a burned-out bulb that needed to be replaced. Even caring for these small tasks drained her easily. She spent all of her energy in her dreams, overnight, looking for Jordan. By morning, she would wake exhausted, as though she hadn't slept.

Finally she reached the deck, 40 steps high. She sat down on the floor for a few minutes to catch her breath, and arranged the mermaid's head on her lap. A few strands of hair trailed over the mermaid's face and Helena snatched at them, brushing them out of those dark, fishy eyes. And those eyes—a person could lose herself in them, could dive down into their cold black waters and drown.

She slid the back door open, then pulled the mermaid into the house. Her tail bounced up and down as it rolled over the sliding door track. Helena took her into the bathroom, heaved her tail up and over the lip of the tub, and followed with the upper half. The mermaid's skin squeaked against the porcelain. She ran cold water from the faucet until it splashed over the sides.

It was enough. She'd done enough. She leaned against the tub and sighed, satisfied.

Now Paul: she would have to explain this to him as reasonably as she could. This was possible. This was reasonable. She had done something. She stroked her fingertips across the mermaid's bruised cheek and decided that that in itself, this purple and gold blossom, would win any argument with Paul.

But before she could wake him, there he was. He walked into the bathroom still wearing his pajamas, grinding the sleep out of his eyes.

"Why all the racket?" he asked, yawning.

And when he removed his hands from his bleary eyes, Helena smiled up at him weakly. She said, "Surprise."

PAUL WAS UNCOOPERATIVE, ANGRY, AND LATER HE realized, a little unkind. Upon seeing his wife sprawled on the bathroom floor with that creature—he immediately thought of it as *that creature*—lounging in the tub behind her, he began to shout. "What have you done? Where did that creature come from? You must be insane, Helena. Completely mad! Get it out. Get it out right now."

She pleaded with him—he knew she'd plead with him, it was like Helena these days—and practically begged him on her knees. "You don't understand, Paul. She's hurt. She needs help. I found her on the beach. Just look at her face, the poor thing's skull has been battered. Please, you must. You have to. You must let her stay."

An awkward pause followed during which Helena looked longingly into his eyes and spoke to him like that, with her eyes. It was a trick she'd always been able to pull on him, and each time she did, he was helpless. Flustered, he fled the bathroom and went to change out of his thin blue pajamas. He wanted real clothes covering his skin. The nightclothes made him feel caught off guard, vulnerable.

They passed the day in a series of short, sharp spats, nearly all of which originated with Paul sliding around the corner to stand uselessly in the doorway of the bathroom. He would stare at Helena pouring handfuls of water along the puckering gills of the mermaid's throat, the thin slits opening and closing, drinking the air out of the water. Or he would comment derisively on finding her humming a wordless tune to the mermaid, something she once did for their daughter when she was a little girl. And Helena would stop

whatever she was doing and say, "What? What are you looking at? Go away!"

He told her he was going to take the mermaid himself and throw her back to the sea. He said, "There are proper channels for dealing with these things, and you, my dear, have followed none of them."

It was true. If she had notified the police, they would have said to leave the mermaid on the beach. They would have come and blocked the area off with sawhorses and yellow tape that had "Do Not Cross" printed on it in bold black. They had dealt with merfolk before, years ago. The proper thing to do would be to wait for high tide to roll in, and allow it to take her home.

They decided to make a pact. Helena explained that she couldn't allow the mermaid to go back with the tide in this condition. She's unconscious, she argued. Defenseless. In this state, a shark or some other scavenging creature could pick at her. Paul agreed easily enough to that. He said, "Till she's well enough, then." And Helena nodded, accepting this proposal. Although, Paul thought, it was a reluctant nod.

"Till she's well enough, then," Helena agreed.

Paul rolled his eyes at this childish bargaining and retreated to his study, hiding among his books, waiting for the moment he could get that creature out of his home. She was eerie. She floated in the tub like a corpse.

He spent the next two days hunched over his desk, busying himself with preparations for the coming semester, until he heard the squeals and screams in the bathroom, announcing she was awake.

After something special of one's own disappears a person should learn to be prepared for unexpected events.

After something special of one's own disappears, a person should learn to be prepared for unexpected events. After Jordan disappeared, Helena came to feel, paradoxically, both ready for anything that might come her direction, as well as ready to disintegrate into tears upon seeing anything even remotely reminiscent of her daughter. Because of these conflicting emotions, she found herself both willful and in tears as she struggled over a bra, black and frilled with lace—one Jordan had left behind—when the mermaid woke up.

"You mustn't struggle so," she told the mermaid, who was attempting to tear the bra from her chest. Helena had covered her with it out of consideration for Paul. But the bra was too large for the mermaid, whose breasts were smaller, firmer than Jordan's, probably from all of that swimming she did. "But it will do," Helena said. She grabbed hold of the straining straps and pulled the bra back on, tightening it like a wicked stepmother. "It will do."

"Having trouble?" Paul asked. He stood in the doorway, still holding a book from his study in one hand.

Helena ignored him. The mermaid bared her teeth, two crooked rows of pearls, and hissed at them. Her bulbous black eyes seemed even more bulbous now that she was awake. And darker as well, like two black moons. They were set far apart in her head, but turned inward a little, so that they seemed to be communicating to each other some deeply private, mysterious secret.

"I'm sorry," Helena said, waggling a finger in the mermaid's face. "But there are rules in this house, young lady. We don't go traipsing around naked. Now it's time for some dinner and then you'll go straight to sleep. Consider yourself grounded. And don't ask for how long either. You've been worrying me sick."

The mermaid's body was so long that her tail hung over the lip of the tub, drooping down toward the tiled floor. She still had ropes of seaweed tangled in her black hair, and sand speckled her skin, as though she'd been dipped in glitter. Helena reached out a tentative hand to stroke the mermaid's hair, but snatched it back when the mermaid suddenly opened her mouth in a wide O and began to scream.

The scream spilled out at such a high, piercing pitch that the bathroom mirror shattered. It burst apart in a rain of jagged silver, clattering into the sink, onto the tiled floor. Pieces lay at Helena's feet, each one reflecting an individual eye, a patch of green scales; or a mouth, unhinged and opened so wide you could see the red, wet skin inside.

Even after the mirror flew apart, the screaming failed to stop. Helena clapped her hands over her ears and looked at Paul, who had done the same. "Stop it!" she shouted over the noise. "Stop it this instant!" Her eardrums thrummed, tightening and vibrating, ready to burst as well. The mermaid gripped the sides of the tub and threw her head back into a higher octave.

Hesitantly, Helena lifted her hand and slapped her across the face. The screaming choked off. "That's enough out of you, young lady," said Helena. She looked at her hand, pink from the slap, then back up at the mermaid, who clutched at her cheek. It was the same cheek, already bruised and swollen with dead black blood from whatever accident knocked her out and washed her ashore two days before. Helena could tell it hurt enough as it was. Now she knew it hurt even more.

Embarrassed, she stood and pushed her way past Paul, out of the room. Past Paul, who told the mermaid, "That's a fine way to act now, isn't it?"

HELENA TRIED TO FIND SOMETHING THAT THE mermaid would eat.

She experimented with seafood, offering up a plate of lemon-pepper whitefish laid on a bed of rice. But the mermaid wrinkled her nose and pushed the plate aside. She hid her face underwater when Helena brought her fried calamari, and pinched her nose between forefinger and thumb when presented with a bowl of fruit. Paul chuckled when informed of this last reaction. "She finds the scent of apples repulsive?" he asked. And Helena shrugged, throwing her hands in the air.

"She has to eat, Paul," Helena said. She lay on the white leather couch in the living room, with her head on the armrest and her feet elevated on pillows. She was exhausted, bustling around for the past two days with more energy than Paul had seen in her for the past year. Whenever she wasn't in the bathroom with the mermaid, she was fixing up the house. Patching up cracks in the walls, polishing furniture, upending reclining chairs to sweep beneath them. There was so much to be done, she murmured as she went. She had let it all go, it had all gone astray.

"Let me have a try," Paul offered. Helena had been staring at the ceiling, at a brown spider-shaped water stain she wanted to erase, but turned her head toward him when he spoke.

"*You?*" She squinted her eyes at him.

"Yes, *me*," Paul said. "I'll take care of it." He rose from his chair, grabbed his jacket from the hall closet, and left the house.

HE SINCERELY WANTED TO HELP. EVEN THOUGH PAUL was angry with Helena, he couldn't stand to see her banging her head against walls over that creature. He had been hoping that she would stop playing these games with herself. Over a month ago, he had found a journal she'd been keeping secretly, in which she wrote long florid letters to their daughter. Or in which she wrote down detailed memories she wanted to capture before forgetting. He had found an entry that read: "My memories flash over my mind, like lightning briefly illuminating a dark landscape." He hadn't known his wife was a poet. He still didn't know if she was a good one or not. And he had found: "Dearest Jordan, I miss you so. When are you coming home? I found a coffee stain the other day and thought of you. Perhaps you made it, before you left? I'm not mad, though. We'll get new carpet! It'll be an excuse."

She collected old newspaper clippings, stories from over two decades before, now yellowed with age. Articles that detailed the resurfacing of the merfolk. They had come with a message, although it took months for translations to occur. They didn't use words but spoke with squeals and clicks, like whales and dolphins. They were sad, they said. So sad to see us still walking on land. It looked painful and exhausting. And why, they wondered, did we continue to put ourselves through this self-imposed exile? It tortured them, to see us torturing ourselves. Come home, they said. You've proven your point. All is forgiven.

They had disappeared soon after arriving, only staying for a few months. And soon after, people started to disappear as well. Or so it was said. Paul knew Helena considered this a possibility with Jordan, that she had gone down beneath the waves to join them. "Others have," Helena said. "A girl who lived down the street from me did. Martha. Martha Pechanski."

But Paul didn't believe Jordan chose that route. A year ago, the last time he saw her, she'd been living with a group of squatters in an abandoned tenement in LA. A friend of Jordan's had phoned him, or someone who had once been a friend, and said she no longer attended classes at UCLA. That she'd hooked into a group, a bad group, the friend said. And that this is where you will find her.

Paul went one day, without Helena, and found Jordan in a dreary room, wearing stained jeans (stained with what, he couldn't tell) and a threadbare T-shirt with the word *Billabong* fading on its front. She'd been a surfer, and still had her board with her even then. Her hair was matted into dull and frizzy coils, almost dreadlocks. "Why?" he had asked her. And she had replied, stroking the board that lay across her lap, "Because it's all a lie." He asked what was all a lie, but Jordan would not elaborate. She only stroked her board like a cat. She was high on meth, he discovered. He went home and told Helena, who immediately made him drive her back. But by then Jordan had gone. Why didn't you bring me? Helena had demanded. Why didn't you let *me* talk to her? Paul had no answers for her then. He still didn't.

Paul stopped at an Asian grocery a few blocks from their house. He bought food there and drove home again, between the roadside corridors of palm trees. At home he unpacked the items in his experiment, and Helena scrutinized everything. It was all Japanese food, she pointed out. "I know," Paul said. "Take this in to her." He held out a plastic package filled with sheets of greenish-black, papyrus-like material, which Helena sniffed at doubtfully.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Roasted seaweed," said Paul.

Martha. Martha Pechanski. The girl with the green eyes and the blonde hair, the blonde hair reaching down to the small of her back. And those legs—those legs that turned anyone's head. Twenty-three when Helena was 17, the girl who lived down the street, the girl who married into the sea. There were two stories about Martha Pechanski and Helena knew them both.

One story said Martha drowned herself in the ocean. She tied plastic grocery bags, filled with rocks, around her belt loops and walked out and out, into the waves, until they covered her head like a veil. She was a sad girl, some said, cut quite a tragic figure. Had problems that no one else knew about. A person would say this while twirling a finger beside their ear.

The other story said Martha Pechanski was in love with a merman she met while surfing one day. She'd been out early in the morning, her legs straddling the board, waiting for a wave, when his head burst out of the water. Like a dolphin or a seal. Some said it was her legs he had noticed from beneath, dangling underwater.

The merman's eyes were like two black glass beads and his hair was moss green. His skin was ivory and his muscles moved beneath his skin like light rippling on water. "If you kiss me forever," he told Martha, "I can breathe for us both beneath the sea." And so she went, clasped in his arms, mouth on his cold mouth, his strong tail pushing them down deep, deeper, until they reached home. There she developed gills and a tail of her own and forgot her former life. It was only in dreams, sometimes, that Martha possessed those head-turning legs once again. And in those dreams, her legs took her step by step back down to the water.

A sea gift, Helena thought. What the sea takes, it gives back in return. She leaned over the edge of the tub and watched the mermaid devour sheet after sheet of seaweed paper. "You like that, don't you?" she said. That and the raw shrimp Paul bought, and the tuna and the salmon eggs. She was a luxurious girl, this one. This mermaid here, now she was a fussy one.

Over the past few days she had eaten her fill of the groceries Paul bought; she had calmed down a bit. With her stomach full, she had given Helena this gift of proximity. She was allowed to be closer now, although the food had to keep coming. They fed her raw oysters, popping them into her mouth like grapes. The days were good, filled with peace and harmony. The only cloud obstructing their place in the sun was that several homeless people were sleeping rough under their deck again. Helena found them. Or rather, heard them, whispering beneath the deck. *Let them stay,* she told herself. *A sea gift,* she thought. *A gift from the sea.*

Soon it would be high tide and the house would no longer be a house.

That and a neighbor phoned, to tell Paul he was bringing someone over to inspect his house; it seemed its foundation had been undermined, the seawall hadn't helped as much as they had hoped. Paul mentioned the call to Helena, but she didn't seem to hear him. "We should get ours looked at as well," Paul said. "And soon. I start fall classes in less than a month."

"Do it then," Helena said. She didn't have time for that. She'd given up on the house to devote herself to the well-being of this girl, this beautiful girl in the bathtub.

She ran a comb through the mermaid's dark, tangled hair. It was a silver comb, an heirloom handed down for generations in Helena's family. The mermaid seemed to enjoy it. She looked at the comb as though she might lick it. She seemed very partial to beautiful combs, Helena thought. Perhaps she lost her own in the accident?

The mermaid grinned at Helena, showing those crooked pearls for teeth, and wagged her tail happily at the other end of the tub. She had accidentally knocked a vial of lavender bath salts off of a

shelf at the far end of the tub the day before; and when they fell in, they clouded the water a light purple, perfuming the air. They had been Jordan's. And now she smelled quite like Jordan used to, Helena thought. A little briny from all of that surfing, and a little lavender as well. Something above and something below.

The other night, Helena had had another dream. This time she'd been invited to a talk show by an uplifting, sentimental host—a woman who was soft and fleshy and obstinately maternal. The show was about people who had disappeared and their loved ones left behind. Paul refused to come, but Helena told the motherly host everything, in front of a studio audience. The audience cried at all the sad parts, which made Helena happy. Somehow, she thought, she'd told Jordan's story right. When Helena finished, the talk show host waggled her eyebrows teasingly and said, "We've searched long and hard, far and deep, and we have someone here we think you'd like to see, Helena." A door opened on the set and out walked Jordan, young and beautiful, eager to be in Helena's arms. Tears were shed by all. The audience applauded and then applauded again. And when all had quieted down, Helena asked, "Why, honey?" But Jordan didn't answer. Helena smelled something fishy. She held her daughter out at arm's length and saw seaweed braided through her hair. The talk show host said how fashionable it looked, asked, "Where did you have it done, dear?" Jordan opened her mouth to answer, but a scream spilled out instead. The scream spilled out and flooded the studio set, washed over the audience, and shattered the camera lenses. This broadcast was at an end. When Helena woke, her head was filled with the static from a dead TV channel.

Helena began to hum a wordless tune, thankful that this dream wasn't as futile as the ones that came before. This one had a bit of hope. The mermaid had finished off the seaweed sheets and now lounged extravagantly, with her head nestled on the lip of the tub, while Helena combed through her hair, freeing it of sea substances. Soon it would be unencumbered by kelp. *A sea gift,* Helena thought again. But this time, something made her afraid.

What if she had gotten it all wrong? she thought. She remembered her articles on the merfolk's resurfacing. They had said, "You came from the sea and to the sea you shall return." And all this time she had been thinking of this process the other way around. Jordan had gone into the sea and now she had returned. Certainly a little changed, but returned nonetheless. What if—and she cringed at her own thoughts—what if this beautiful girl in the tub would have to go back? She had come from the sea. Would she have to return again? Helena couldn't bear that. She'd lost too much already.

The mermaid had fallen asleep. A mucousy film slid down over her black eyes, clouding them, making her look blind. "I need something from you," Helena whispered. "Not much. Just something to remember you by, in case you have to go."

She stood and padded out of the bathroom, returning a few moments later with a pair of orange-handled scissors. She knelt beside the tub again, and plucked a long tress of black hair away from the mermaid's face, lifting it high to get at its roots. It smelled of lavender and of something dark and underwater. She slid it between the mouth of the scissors and gently squeezed them closed.

PAUL WAS ON THE BACK DECK, DRINKING A GLASS of bourbon, when he heard the screams. At first he thought it might be another of the mermaid's fits, but soon realized that someone was in pain. He flew through the house until he came to the bathroom and grabbed hold of the door frame to stop himself from running any farther.

Helena sat on the floor with her legs folded beneath her, holding a pair of scissors in one hand and a hank of hair in the other. The mermaid writhed in the tub, throwing her tail back and forth, cracking it against the wall. Soon paint flaked off, then plaster began to fall away. Green blood pulsed out of her scalp, poured over her face, branching and rebranching like lightning. "Shh, shh," Helena pleaded. "Please, I'm sorry, I didn't mean, please." She reached out to touch the mermaid reassuringly, but was rejected with bloody hands.

The mermaid squealed like a child, she screeched like a gull. She stuttered an annoying patter of clicks and stops, then moaned a deep mournful song that climbed steeply into a howl. "What have you done, Helena?" Paul asked. But Helena only shook her head, as if nothing was wrong. Nothing at all.

"That's enough," Paul said. He plunged his hands into the bath water and pulled the mermaid out. His back strained and he almost buckled over. Her scales scraped at his flesh and a pink rash, the color of a fresh burn, bloomed on the insides of his arms. "It's no good," he told Helena. "I'm sending her home."

As soon as he made it to the back deck, Helena was up on her feet and behind him. "Wait, Paul, don't do this. You don't understand. You don't understand." But he didn't listen. He stepped down and down until his feet reached sand, and then headed off in the direction of the nearest pier. He could see its lights in the distance, like strange pearls floating in midair.

"NO, PAUL," HELENA SHOUTED AS HE STALKED AWAY down the beach. But he didn't listen to her, only kept walking. She balled her hands into fists and hit the deck railing in front of her. She sat down in a chair and wept. What had happened? What had happened? Why all of that blood? Her thoughts raced around in circles and she struggled to catch one. If she could only sort this out, she could stop things from progressing, she knew.

But her thoughts stopped abruptly, interrupted by what sounded like voices. Beneath her feet. Beneath the deck. "Go away," Helena murmured, but they continued to chatter beneath her anyway. "Go away, I said." She raised her voice. She stamped her foot on the floorboard beneath her. "Get out!" she screamed. "Get out of here!" She stood from her chair and began to jump up and down on the deck. The boards twittered beneath her weight. "Get the hell out of here!"

Beneath the deck, beneath her feet, they could see light from overhead, filling the cracks between the floorboards. Dust and sand sifted down between these cracks each time the woman jumped. "Get the hell out of here!" she screamed. And so they gathered up their sleeping bags and scrabbled down the boulders.

Helena watched them go. They scurried away like beach squirrels or rats. She yelled at them once more, for good measure. They disappeared, swallowed by the night.

Where was I? she thought. *Green blood,* she reminded herself. *Start there. Find the thread and go back.* What had happened?

But before she could begin again, the house moved beneath her, disturbed by its dreams. It shifted and trembled, as in an earthquake. The windows rattled in their frames. Pictures fell from their walls. The cracks Helena had patched days ago reappeared. She stood in the doorway between the deck and the house and waited to see what would happen.

For the entire length of the pier, Paul carried the mermaid in his arms like a bride. He staggered with her past fishermen with buckets full of sand sharks, past a cigarette stand closed for the night, past rollerbladers executing stunts on steps and benches. He walked all the way to the end of the pier, where a restaurant had been built as a tourist trap. People came and went home to their friends and told them, "I ate over the ocean." As Paul passed by its plate glass windows, the people inside pointed out at him, or pressed their faces against the tinted glass to stare.

At the end of the pier, he lifted the mermaid over the rails and said, "Good-bye." For a moment, as he looked into her

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the Haggard Project

BY JANE FRANK

H. RIDER HAGGARD'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO FANTASY LITERATURE HAVE ASSURED HIM A permanent place in the history of the genre. He wrote remarkable adventures and fantasies set in locales that were exotic for readers in the late 19th century, and remain so for readers today. His stories span the centuries—from prehistory through ancient Egypt and the Middle East, to the Crusades, the Aztec Empire, and finally to 19th-century Africa—and are written with a vigor and sense of excitement that remains entertaining despite the now old-fashioned Victorian writing style. His works have been published in dozens of languages and the best-known of these have been translated into film, stage plays, and opera (*King Solomon's Mines, She, Allan Quatermain*). Some have been continuously in print for over a hundred years.



At the age of 19, Haggard was sent to Africa where he served on the staff of the newly appointed Governor of Natal. Eighteen months later he was part of a special mission that resulted in the annexation of the Transvaal to Great Britain. By age 21, Haggard was Master and Registrar of the High Court of Pretoria. He returned to England when he was 25. Later, he became a lawyer, a social reformer, an agricultural revolutionary, and a public servant concerned with subjects as varied as soil erosion and the settlement of the poor. But it is for his strong and vividly told historical fantasy adventures that he is best remembered. He is also credited for having influenced Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Rice Burroughs—both of whom have acknowledged their debt to Haggard for inspiring their tales.

At age 29, Henry Rider Haggard wrote *King Solomon's Mines* in six weeks in his spare time. Two years later he wrote *She*. The public devoured his books and by the time of his death Haggard had written 42 fantasy and adventure romances, 12 novels, and 10 works of nonfiction. Through time my husband Howard and I have acquired all of Haggard's books, and as we acquired books, it occurred to us that Haggard-related illustrative art would complement the collection.



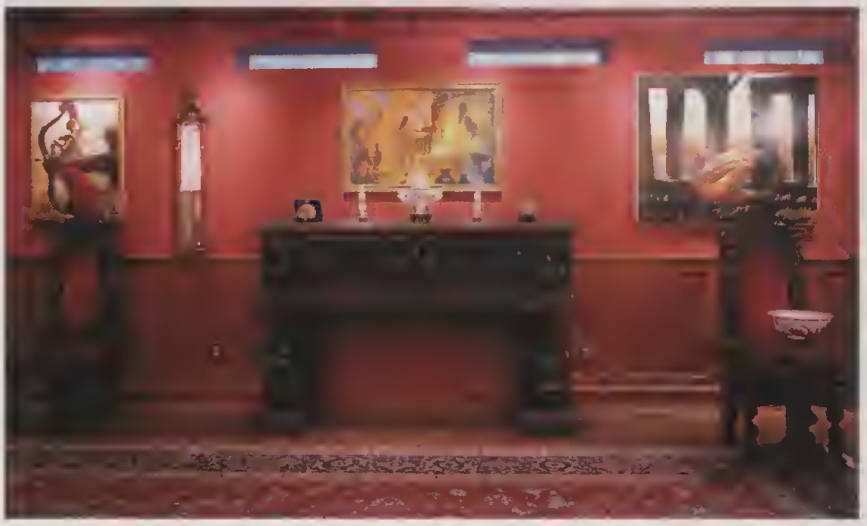
Michael Whelan's glorious She *is surrounded by mists and the red light of the setting sun.*

OPPOSITE TOP: The Wanderer's Necklace *by Lawrence Sterne Stevens appeared on the cover of the April 1953 issue of* Famous Fantastic Mysteries.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: An unknown artist created the cover illustration for Dawn, *published by Hodder and Stoughton in the 1920s.*

Today's leading illustrators capture the spirit of H. RIDER HAGGARD'S fantasy novels in a gallery of cover paintings.





ABOVE: Bob Eggleton's painting was inspired by The Ancient Allan, *part of the Allan Quatermain saga.*

RIGHT: The Haggard Room's Victorian décor is an appropriate setting for artists' interpretations of Haggard's work.

CENTER: Stephen Hickman was well familiar with Haggard's writings and took on the painting of Nada the Lily *with great enthusiasm.*

During the airplane flight back from a London visit in 1998, we conceived a project to create a new series of Haggard cover paintings. We envisioned a series of major paintings, created by today's leading illustrators, each in his own inimitable style. We hoped to capture the spirit of Haggard's most significant or memorable fantasy novels by matching the artist's style to the spirit of the book. As part of the project, we would decorate a special room to hang the paintings, and it was of course called "The Haggard Room." Measuring 18 by 27 feet, it has Victorian décor appropriate to Haggard's time, with coffered ceilings, an oriental rug on the floor, walnut paneling, and wainscoting on the walls with appropriately patterned wallpaper above.

We decided to begin the project with *King Solomon's Mines* and we asked Don Maitz to do it. He was thrilled to be assigned Haggard's first published and most widely known novel, and he did a fantastic job. Luckily, we had found an artist who had "read the book, seen two screen versions, and listened to the recorded book on several occasions!"

The results have been wonderful and absolutely gratifying. Each artist created a truly memorable work, technically masterful and artistically superb. These are *Cleopatra* by Richard Bober, *The Ancient Allan* by Bob Eggleton, *King Solomon's Mines* by Don Maitz, *Pearl Maiden* by Gary Ruddell, *The World's Desire* (co-authored with Haggard by Andrew Lang) by Jeffrey Jones, *The Brethren* by Ian Miller, *Eric Bright-Eyes* by Donato Giancola, *Nada the Lily* by Steve Hickman, and *She* by Michael Whelan.

We were surprised by the lengths to which the artists went in researching their assignments before completing the paintings.



Richard Bober, for example, investigated Egyptian statues and historical references for the dress, demeanor, and "décor" in *Cleopatra* The result is a languid, classically posed, finely Grecian *Cleopatra* with startlingly expressive eyes. Another, Bob Eggleton, read the book and then just kept on reading! Assigned the painting for *The Ancient Allan*, Bob found that "this offbeat story in the Allan Quatermain saga was not what one would expect. Basically it is a tale that takes place in another timeline, in another age with quite literally, an ancient Egyptian 'Allan.'"

So, he read histories of the time period, he did research into the costumes, he studied pictures of artifacts and antiquities held by museums. By the time he had finished the painting, he knew more about the book's background and themes than we did!

In several instances, we had trouble deciding which sketch to take to final because they were all so good. We wanted them all, so in one case, *Eric Bright-Eyes*, we just gave up and told the artist, Donato (Giancola) to "go ahead and paint the second painting." What was even more unusual about this decision was that Eric turned out to be a triptych, and the second painting, *Eric and Skalaigrim*, was an alternative to the center panel, so by strict counting, there are actually *four* paintings interpreting this ancient Norse/Viking tale.

As Donato explains it, "The novel '*Eric Bright-Eyes*' is rich with visual imagery of landscapes, grand conflict, and passion. To illustrate the epic exploits in the book I chose an allegorical representation rather than a direct narrative treatment. The love triangle between the main characters, Eric, Gudruda, and Swanhild, suggested that a triptych was the optimum solution. Eric, as the center of the story, is also the center of the triptych. The pursuit of Eric's sexual and social validation, and its unattainable resolution, is the driving force of unity and tension both within the story and this triptych."

We chose Ian Miller to illustrate *The Bretbren*, a medieval story of the exploits of two warrior cousins during the Crusades, because of his unique style. We expected Ian would produce a very special work, and we were not disappointed! As did other artists, he poured himself into the commission, telling us, "Observational drawings made by scholars of the period in Constantinople provided me with excellent reference material for both the Christian Knights and the Saracen soldiers. It was very interesting to discover how the garb, armor, and weaponry of the Saracens differed so much from the standard movie perceptions. Straight swords were very much the thing with little evidence of the curved scimitar-type blade. People knowledgeable in this field would probably say, "Why yes of course," but it was a perceptual rework for me.... No matter how many times you use a particular technique or style of







ABOVE: Christians battle Saracens in Ian Miller's The Brethren.

LEFT TOP: Richard Bober did extensive research on Egypt before painting Cleopatra.

LEFT: Eric and Skalaigrim *is the second painting in a triptych by Donato Giancola., based on Haggard's Norse/Viking tale* Eric Bright-Eyes.



image making there should always be room to push back the boundaries and through experiment expand your awareness."

We suspect some of the artists we approached had never read Haggard's books before we gave them copies. Others, like Steve Hickman, were intimately familiar with Haggard's works, saying of *Nada the Lily,* "Victorian British authors have a feeling to them that I've always loved, a solidity and optimism that provides a particularly poignant escapism from the chaos of our present-day existence. I've read Haggard since I was in high school, and have always considered him among the best of the high fantasists, rereading my favorites from year to year."

At the outset of the project, we drew up a list of the books we would illustrate and the artists we wanted for each book. When it came to *She,* Howard had been obsessed by the choice of an artist for this famous book. While many artists have painted fine images of *She,* he felt that there was only one artist to interpret this work for our project—Michael Whelan. Michael declined this commission initially because of his tight schedule. He did, however, offer some hope saying that "he loved the book and hoped someday to paint at least one image from it." Therefore, we were both delighted when that "someday" arrived about two years later, when Michael signed up for the project. The finished painting arrived three years from the time of his acceptance of the commission.

There is a special problem with illustrating *She,* as most artists concede, and that is the difficulty of depicting the main character herself. As described by Haggard, *She* is incomparably, stunningly beautiful. It's a daunting task for any painter to portray a beauty as Haggard describes, a beauty so timeless and compelling that men fall prostrate before her feet at the mere sight of her! Whelan was firm in saying, "From the outset I had rejected the climactic scene at the end, done to death in so many movies and previous illustrations; a cliché. Surely in a book filled with such wonder there would be other scenes that would be as good to illustrate. Ah, but which part to choose? There are so many memorable scenes! I wrestled for many days with the possibilities. In the end, there really was no doubt in my mind which part to concentrate on. About three-quarters of the way through the book, *She* leads Holly and his companions across a great chasm, illuminated by the red shaft of the setting sun, surrounded by swirling mists. No doubt about it, it had to be that scene!"

Our wait for *She* was well worth it—as you can judge for yourself.

The Haggard Project has been a highly rewarding experience. We got to work with some of the world's greatest artists and we helped bring into existence some wonderful art. Every one of the paintings that are part of the Haggard Project is the right piece. We love them and we're sure that Haggard would have loved them too! ❧

A more extensive treatment of the Haggard Project can be found in the new art book, Fantasy Themes from the Frank Collection, *Paper Tiger Press (UK), 2003.*

By Eric T. Baker

Planting seeds in the past ensures an evil-free future in *Dark Cloud 2.*

Dark Cloud 2 from Sony for the PlayStation2 is a fantasy role-playing game in which the players take the roles of Max, a child of the future, and Monica, a time traveler from the past. They meet because an evil ruler is attempting to defeat a rebellion in the present by wiping out its members in the past. The problem with this plan is that the future is now so changed that only one city is left in all the world. The two young heroes team up to stop the ruler and rebuild the present.

The gameplay of *DC2* is in the *Final Fantasy X* tradition. Between lavish and well-animated cut scenes, the characters wander dungeons, killing monsters, collecting treasure, and fine-tuning their weapons and spells. The battles are in real time rather than rounds and the environment is interactive enough that the characters can pick up some items and throw them as weapons. Some of the monsters are goofy and some are scary, which fits them right into the mood of a game whose hero may be chased across the rooftops by a huge, multiarmed robot with a leering clown's face painted on its head.



There are two things that set *DC2* apart from most other RPGs. The first is that the weapons and artifacts the heroes use are characters in their own right. They have hit points and skill levels of their own. Like the heroes themselves, the weapons and artifacts have to be healed and improved. The improvement is done along paths where found ingredients are bonded to the artifacts. Each ingredient makes the artifact more powerful at a certain kind of damage, such as fire, water, or bashing. When the artifact is high enough in the right levels, it transforms into a better version of what it was. And then the improvement starts again.

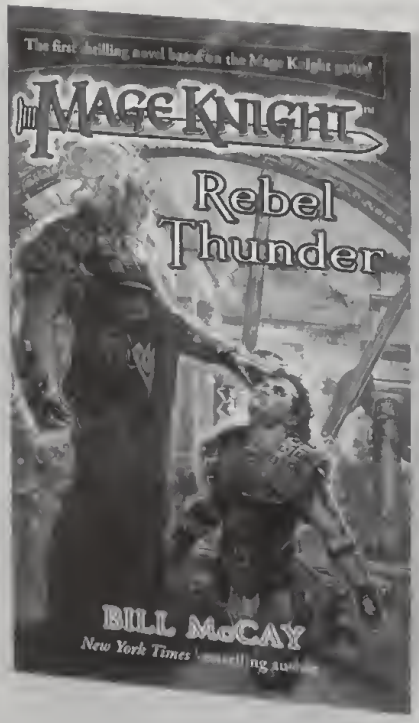
The other thing that makes *DC2* different is that the characters literally rebuild the world, the future world, as part of the game. As the game goes on, the characters collect blueprints and materials they need to construct new towns. "Seeds" in hand, they travel back to the past, plant the towns, and then return to the future to explore the full-grown fruits of their work. Building the towns properly is just as important as putting the artifacts together in the right



ABOVE: Hack like an Egyptian: Gygax's megadungeon is back in White Wolf's Necropolis.
RIGHT: Relive the movie in Decipher's RPG, The Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Adventure Game: The Two Towers.

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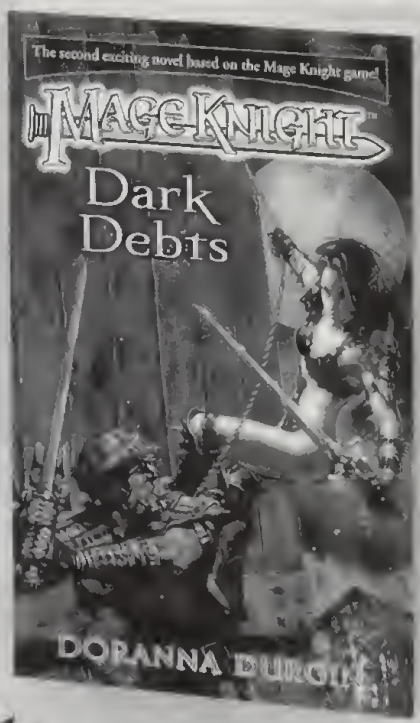


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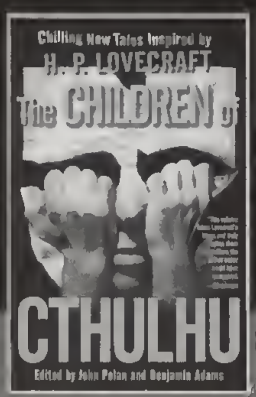
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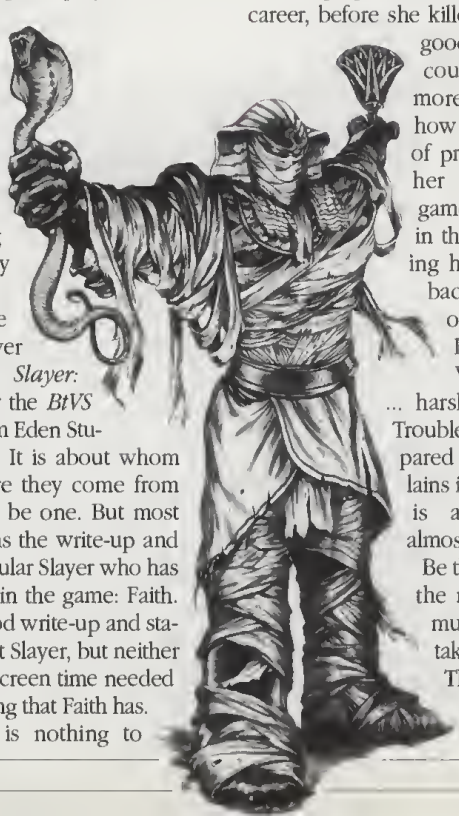


order. Without the right artifacts, the characters won't survive in the dungeons. Without the right towns, they won't have the elements they need to defeat the evil ruler.

The world of *DC2* is a fun one to wander around in. It has a cartoony, steampunky look to it, where devices with modern- day functions such as walkie-talkies and cars have a wood and iron motif. The controls are easy to learn, and with one exception, easy to master. The blue button activates whatever is the "hot" item in the character's belt. Players who sometimes find themselves hitting the blue button when they meant to hit the yellow may be better off leaving the belt empty so they don't exhaust precious supplies needlessly.

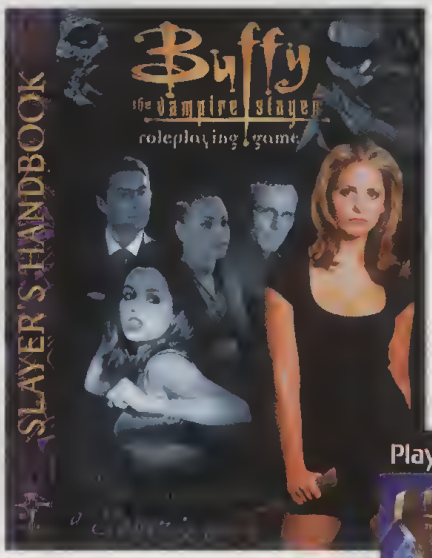
The only serious flaw in *DC2* is that players cannot save in the middle of a dungeon level. Thus, if the character is cut down by the last monster on the threshold of escaping the level, the player has to reload and try again, fighting all the monsters one more time. With average reflexes and paying proper attention to building and maintaining the artifacts, replaying levels doesn't happen too often, but there is enough repetition in clearing the dungeons already without this added annoyance.

Overall, *Dark Cloud 2* is enough like other console RPGs that longtime players will recognize it, but different enough from other RPGs that those same players will enjoy it. Players who have never tried the RPG genre before won't have much trouble with the learning curve and should enjoy the game as well.



Oddly enough, the 156-page, hardcover *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Slayer's Handbook* for the *BtVS Roleplaying Game* from Eden Studios is about Slayers. It is about whom Slayers are and where they come from and what it is like to be one. But most importantly, it contains the write-up and statistics for one particular Slayer who has been sadly neglected in the game: Faith. Kendra also gets a good write-up and statistics, as does the First Slayer, but neither of them received the screen time needed to develop the following that Faith has.

Statistically, there is nothing to argue about in the game's write-up of Faith. She is portrayed as the combat equal of Season 3 Buffy, which may actually be a little generous. The write-up is accurate and a good summary of her career on the show, and the tips for role-playing her are helpful. The advice to bring her into the campaign at the beginning of her career, before she killed a human, is good, but there could have been more said about how to get her out of prison and bring her back into a game group. The sour note in the Faith material is giving her cruelty as a drawback. Just because she once tried to torture Buffy and did torture Wesley, it seems a little ... harsh to label her cruel. Troubled, certainly, but compared to so many of the villains in the Buffyverse, Faith is almost gentle. Well, almost.





Be that as it is, there is also the rest of the book. The musings on the Slayers take up the first 24 pages. The middle of the book is devoted to the premise of giving the GM and the players more choices about where and how they want to play their *BtVS* campaign. There are new advantages and disadvantages, new weapons and gadgets, and new backgrounds and new archetypes. There are 17 new archetypes in the book, 7 different types of Slayers, and 10 different types of Scoobies.

The best parts of this middle section are the three mini-campaign backgrounds, complete with statted up nonplayer characters, character hooks, and adventure ideas. The first, and least interesting, stays in the modern day, but moves to a Hellmouth in a different part of the United States. More interesting is the Stakes and Six-Shooters setting, *BtVS* in the Old West. Most interesting of all is the Hellworld setting: what California would be like if Glory had succeeded in using Dawn to tear down the walls between dimensions. This is the darkest of the settings and even includes one of the original Scoobies as a major NPC.

The last part of the book is a five-episode adventure that ties back into most of the crunchy bits detailed earlier in book. It is compatible with the adventure from the core rulebook and the series of episodes on the GM's screen. This adventure explores the question of whether being a Slayer is about more than just having the Slayer's powers.

Behind the adventure is an appendix that contains more help for making the players' campaign more like the show. Called "Character Speak," it details how the series' main characters talk. For each it lists their primary character traits and gives an example of dialog that highlights them. It is fun reading and a good reference.

The *Handbook* is not an indispensable part of the *BtVS* library. After all, Kendra had one and look what happened to her. Buffy herself never had one, and if Faith had one, she certainly never read it. On the other hand, for real people wanting to portray Slayers and for GM's looking for more good campaign information, the *Handbook* is a very useful tool.



Speaking of slaying, it is easy to forget in these days of online death matches and MMORPGs that the term "player killer" goes all the way back to the dawn of role-playing games. Back then, at the beginning of the paper and dice age, a "player killer" was a GM who made dungeons so tricky and so dangerous that the players who dared them lost their characters in droves. And the archetype of the player killer was Gary Gygax, one of the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

More than two decades later, Gygax is still writing dungeon modules, and his latest is *Necropolis* from Necromancer Games, an imprint of White Wolf. The 284-page book is based on the Aegyptus module Gygax wrote for the *Dangerous Journies* game. It converts the old creatures from the Mythus system to the D20 system, and it adds lots of new stuff including an adventure in the temple of Set, details of 60 Egpytian/Khemitian gods, a new ranger class, new prestige classes, new spells, new magic items, new monsters, new cleric domains, and much more.

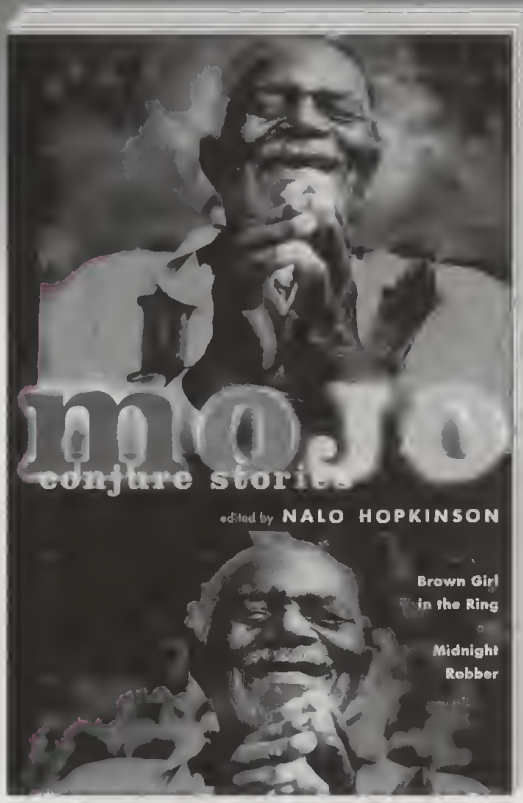
The book is divided into 11 chapters and several appendixes. Chapter 1 is the introduction. It explains that Khemit (the land of the adventure) is like Egypt, only different. It lays out the menace facing the players' characters and outlines how the game might go. Chapter 2 tells how to get the characters into the adventures and what the villains are going to do about them.

Chapter 3 is the first setting in the book. Aartuat is a small village where the characters get introduced to the land of Khemit. Here they find their first allies and begin their long war with the villains. Chapter 4 is another location near Aartuat. Chapter 5 covers the road through the Gorge to the Temple of Osiris, which is covered in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 is the path beyond the temple with the lesser tombs and other encounters that lead up to Chapter 8 where Rahotep's (the main villain) Tomb is detailed. This is the end of the adventure, unless the characters fall for the trap that teleports them to the Temple of

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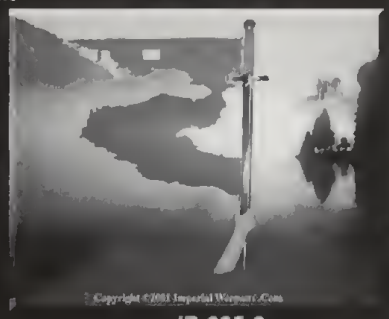


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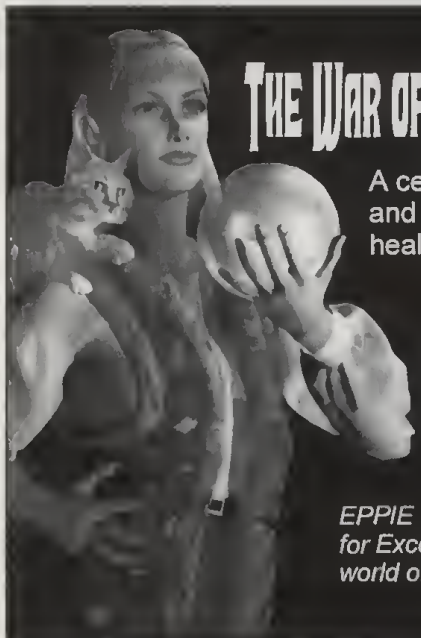
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Set, which is written up in Chapter 11.

Chapter 9 is an epilogue that wraps up the adventure, and Chapter 10 is a two-page handout—called the "Blemmysh Tribesman's Account"—to give to the party at the very beginning to the adventure. The appendices list the NPCs of *Necropolis* with stats and personality notes, plus the 50 new monsters, background on the Lands of Khemit, and descriptions of the 50 Gods of Khemit. The final appendix contains classes, spells, and items of Khemit including the ranger variant.

Basically, the book is a huge, varied, and extremely dangerous dungeon crawl. It is so big and so danger-packed that if eight characters start the adventure at 10th level, most of them will have advanced to 18th level by the time the adventure is over. Rahotep's Tomb by itself is so full of experience points on the hoof that there are two separate places built in for the party to stop, rest, and even level up.

And the party will need those levels. Gygax sets the level of danger as high as he ever has and the adventure is full of chances for the whole party to die in sudden and unexpected ways. It is important for the players to cultivate the NPCs who might be willing to fight with them as the extra firepower will come in very handy. This is not a module for the casual or the faint of heart. It is an adventure for players who like to go into every fight uncertain if they will prevail.

Of course, some players get tired of always being monster food. Sometimes they want to be the monsters. For those players, Wizards of the Coast has released *Savage Species*. This remarkable 224-page book contains detailed information on constructing playable characters from the *Dungeons & Dragons* monster races. It is extremely complete. The book covers not just the monsters, but how to convert the materials of the normal character races and classes into weapons, spells, classes, and magic items that monsters can use and advance with.



With the aid of the *SS* book, monster characters can either be added to existing, traditional parties, or they can be the focus of new, monster-based campaigns. Complete monster classes are listed for over 50 existing monsters, from Air Elementals to Umber Hulks, from Djinni to Stone Giants, and from Mummies to Ogres. There are, however, complete rules for creating monster classes for races not already done, and there are even rules for creating prestige monster classes.

A terrific and complete supplement, *SS* is well worth the money for players wishing to have a monster-based campaign. And wouldn't it be a hoot to see a party of Mummies and Umber Hulks taking on the *Necropolis* module?

For a more traditional take on high-fantasy adventure, check out *The Lord of the Rings Role-playing Adventure Game: The Two Towers* from Decipher Inc. It is the second in a series of role-playing adventure games based on the movies of *The Lord of the Rings*. Like the first one, it contains everything needed for a GM and a few players to take the roles of the characters from the film and live out their adventures. For those who have never played a paper-and-dice RPG before and who are fans of the film, this is a painless way to enter the hobby.

In form, the game is basically a pick-your-path book with a moderator. The 56-page adventure booklet is in three parts. It starts in the plains of Rohan, continues into the city of Edoras, and from there moves to the siege of the Hornburg. The Fast Play rules take just minutes to read and understand. They contain all that is needed to play the adventure game, but also form a good introduction to the full RPG. There are four full-color character sheets detailing the heroes, and three full-color tactical maps to keep track of the action. The map for Helm's Deep is 34" x 22" and there are dice and dozens of color counters for representing the forces of good and evil as the battle plays out. It is a low-stress, easy-to-play, and enjoyable way to relive the movie. ❧

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Continued from page 27

of Aphasia. What at first reads like a delightful piece of whimsy spun on a ticklish froth of inspired language soon begins to metamorphose before your astonished eyes into something darker and more serious, yet without losing its witty, effervescent tone. A remarkable performance.

World Fantasy Award winner Ford's contribution is equally remarkable. In "The Weight of Words," a lonely man very much adrift following a divorce initiated by his wife becomes involved with Albert Secmatte, a self-proclaimed "Chemist of Printed Language" who has devised a formula by which subliminal texts of irresistible suggestive power can be invisibly inserted into otherwise ordinary pieces of prose. This dark (and often darkly humorous) tale of sin and redemption, a kind of postmodern Kabalistic fable, builds to a haunting poignancy that is thoroughly earned.

Meditations on Middle-Earth (St. Martin's Griffin, NY, trade paperback, 235 pp., $13.95, ISBN 0-312-30290-8).

The success of Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* has made Tolkien a hotter property than ever. Publishers large and small are rushing books into print, hoping to appeal to the legions of new fans who have come to the novel through the movies. It's rather sad, in an Entish kind of way, to reflect that, wonderful though the films are, no one will ever again be able to read *LOTR* as I and most of you did, free of any fixed iconography to mediate the impact of Tolkien's great tale on our imaginations. Just how powerful and enduring that impact can be is testified to by the writers whose reflections on Tolkien and *LOTR* make up *Meditations on Middle-Earth*. Edited by Karen Haber, and featuring essays by the likes of Poul Anderson, Michael Swanwick, Ursula K. Le Guin, Diane Duane, and Robin Hobb, *Meditations* is a worthy addition to any Tolkien aficionado's bookshelf. The essays are often disarmingly personal, generous, and (with a few exceptions) free of ego and agendas. The best of the essays are by the writers listed above; reading them, it's easy to feel that you are sitting down with good friends and swapping memories of that magical first encounter with hobbits ... easy, that is, until the literary insights one expects from such stellar talents as Le Guin and Swanwick start to emerge. Then it's more like sitting in on an informal master class in writing, for the light these authors shine into Tolkien's work reflects back into their own fiction in fascinating and surprising ways. That's the real influence of Tolkien, still going strong in this, the year of his "eleventy-first" birthday. ❧

Paul Witcover

Continued from page 55

as she had been told, and still less than she had imagined. There was nothing at all to see.

Even so, the taste of salt was novel to her, and the cold embrace of water against her skin was nothing like celestial ether. Disappointed though she was, she was fascinated, too. On the bottom of the sea, she discovered the sensation of walking. In time, she wandered high enough to encounter light, and finally air. She walked ashore in a place where mountains met the sea. For the first time, Alephestra saw trees. She heard the waves breaking at her feet and the cries of gulls. She stood amazed. Apollo's chariot slowly crossed the sky, and the shifting shadows amazed Alephestra. The colors of the sunset made her sigh. Stars burned forth. Tides rose and fell around her, and she did not move from where she stood.

She might have stayed rooted to the spot if Jupiter had not happened to notice her. The father god had recovered from his disappointment as soon as another maiden had caught his fancy. But he remembered his annoyance when he saw how delighted Alephestra was with the world. He dispatched Mercury to show her the worst that the earthly realm had to offer.

Mercury saw how Alephestra admired a virgin forest, so he took her to the hills around a city where men were cutting the last trees. Alephestra knelt beside a broken stump in awe of the fresh wood's color and smell. The messenger showed her war. She was fascinated by the scarlet wounds and the smell of flesh. He opened graves for her, and she sighed with pleasure to see corruption and the feast of worms. The world of mortals was not at all what she had expected, but everything about it amazed her. Mercury showed her everything that was base. Nothing displeased her. When he had run out of ideas, Mercury returned to tell the father god of the little moon's ceaseless fascination. On her own Alephestra continued to walk the world, astonished by the shimmer of moonlight on a river, the sound of wind blowing over dunes, the smell of smoke, of mildew, of blossoms. She sampled the taste of dew, of copper, of ashes. She kept moving. When Mercury returned with orders to restore her to her place in the sky, he could not find her.

She never was returned to her place in the heavens. She moved from one delight to another, never lingering. Astonished, then gone.

When we gaze into the red depths of a canyon or across an expanse of rusting steel, she sees the same blade of tender grass that we see. She may be watching the smoke curl from a cigarette or listening as a key rasps in the lock. Where white blossoms open or a poisoned animal lies down to die, her sighs mingle with the breeze. She is always here. She is always already gone. ❧





empire

Continued from page 49

"Not someday," says the Emperor Basil III. "Now."

"Now," Mulreany echoes. An unexpected twist. The Emperor doesn't want to chop off the heads of the sorcerers he has sent his police to round up; the Emperor just wants one to give him a guided tour of Chicago. This afternoon, say. Mulreany smiles and bows. "Certainly, your majesty. Whatever your majesty wishes." He wonders how the old Emperor would react to his first glimpse of the downtown skyscrapers. He wonders what sort of greeting Chicago would give the Emperor. The whole thing is nutty, of course. But for him it's a plausible way out. He continues to smile. "We can leave immediately, if you desire, your majesty."

The High Thekanotis seems about to have a stroke. His chest heaves, his face puffs up furiously, he brandishes the jade scepter like a battle axe.

But it's the Emperor who keels over instead. The excitement of the prospect of his trip across the line has done him in. He turns very pale and puts his hands to his chest and utters a little dry rasping sound, and his eyes roll up in his head, and he pitches forward head first so rapidly that two of the guardsmen are just barely able to catch him before he hits the stone floor.

The room goes berserk. The guardsmen start moaning and chanting; court officials come running in from all directions; the Emperor, who seems to be in the grip of some sort of seizure, arches his back, slaps his hands against the floor, stamps his feet, babbles wild nonsensical syllables.

Mulreany, watching in astonishment, feels the High Thekanotis's powerful hand encircling his forearm.

"Go," the grand vizier tells him. "Get yourself out of here, and never come back. Out now, before the Emperor returns to consciousness and sees you again. Now." The vizier shakes his head. "Chicago! He would visit Chicago! Madness! Madness!"

Mulreany doesn't need a second invitation. A couple of guardsmen grab him under the arms and hustle him from the room and down the hall and through the palace's endless hallways and, at long last, out through an immense arch into the broad plaza in front of the building.

It's the middle of the day. The 52-hour visitation is long over; the gateway between the eras is shut.

Go, the High Thekanotis said. But where? Afghanistan?

And then, to his amazement, Mulready sees the interface still glowing in the sky down at the eastern end of town. So there must have been another match-up with Chicago while he was in the imperial hoosegow. He can get across after all, back to good old Chi. The Loop, the Bears, the Water Tower, Charlie Trotter's, everything. Sprinting as if six demons are on his tail, he rushes toward the waterfront, jostling people out of his way. He'll be coming back empty-handed this trip, but at least he'll be coming back.

He reaches the Street of the Eastern Sun. Rushes out onto one of the wharves, plunges joyously into the golden light of the interface.

And comes out in a lovely green forest, the biggest trees he's ever seen this side of California. Everything is wonderfully silent. He hears the chirping of birds, the twittering of insects.

Oh, shit, he thinks. Where the hell is Chicago?

He looks back, bewildered. The interface line is gone, and so is the imperial capital. There's nothing here but trees. Nothing. Nothing. He walks for half an hour, heading east into the sun, and still he sees only this tremendous virgin forest, until at last he stumbles forward out of the woods and discovers himself to be at the shore of a gigantic lake, and then the awful truth strikes him with the impact of a tidal wave.

Of course. It's an era mismatch.

The interface must have closed right on schedule, and opened again a little while afterward, but this time the Empire had lined itself up against some other sector of the timestream very distant from his own. Just as the Empire that arrives in his Chicago is the one of Basil III sometimes and sometimes the one of Miklos and sometimes the one of Kartouf the Hapless, so too does the Empire of Basil's time line itself up sometimes with Chicago-1990, and sometimes Chicago-1996, and sometimes Chicago-2013—

And sometimes, probably, the one of 1400 AD. Or of 1400 BC, not that it makes much difference. Before 1833, there wasn't any city at all here beside Lake Michigan.

A mismatch, then. He has heard rumors of such things occurring. One of those little thousand-to-one glitches that hardly ever actually happen, and that you assume never will happen to you. But this one has. He's known a few crossers who didn't come back. Schmucks, he always figured. Now it's his turn to be the schmuck. Mulreany wonders what it's going to be like living on nuts and berries, and trying to kill a deer if he feels like having a little protein. It's goddamned embarrassing, is what it is.

But he's an optimist at heart. There's cause for hope, right? Right? Sooner or later, he tells himself, the golden light will glow in the sky again behind him, and the Empire will return, and he'll go through the interface to the glorious city beyond, and eventually, after skulking around in it for a while, waiting for the right Chicago to come along, he'll go back across and find his way home.

Sooner or later, yes.

Or maybe not.❧

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mermaid

Continued from page 65

eyes, her face melted like hot wax and reformed itself into his daughter's face. He released her, and she spiraled down toward the black ocean like a green ribbon snatched from someone's hand by the wind. There was a splash, and when he leaned over the rails to search for signs of her, there were none. Only reflected yellow light from the pier lamps, striping the black water.

Back at the house, the house that now swayed and creaked like a storm-tossed ship, Helena had fallen into bed. Furniture scraped across the floors Wineglasses dropped from their racks in the kitchen. They shattered like icicles against the linoleum floor. The house was crumbling, sliding slowly down the cliffside. With each bump and unexpected movement, Helena was tossed around on her bed. The tide was sweeping in, hissing up to meet the house on the beach. Soon it would be high tide and then the house would no longer be a house, Helena thought. Then it would be a boat. A house boat. It would drift, unmoored, out to sea. By sunrise she expects she and the house will have traveled some distance out, but not so far that she'll be unable to step out to the back deck and wave to Paul, who will be on the beach. A tiny black speck scratching his head, wondering what has happened. She will wave to him with both arms, big enough for him to see. And then—because it's obvious now that this house is unsound, its cracks appearing everywhere, certainly not a seaworthy vessel—she will abandon ship. She will wait till sunset, when the sun floats over the waves, and then she'll jump, so that Paul and any other spectators will see her as a silhouette against it. A red disc spread out on the white sky, like Japan's flag, and inside it, a graceful woman diving into the sea.

She will take with her only the mermaid's tress of hair, tied around her neck like a choker. And perhaps it will gift her with powers. Perhaps it will enable her to breathe water. Then she will swim down, like the Pechanski girl, like Martha, that crazy in love girl from her youth, and she will search the coral kingdoms for Jordan.

Perhaps someday she will wash ashore, a naked woman covered only with her own bruises, who has been to the ends of the earth, to history, and back. And maybe someone will find her and drag her home.

Helena rocks on the waves of her bed. The house rocks on the waves of the ocean. She understands that going under with only a lock of hair in her possession is not the sanest plan. Still, she brings the hair to her face and inhales its salty lavender scent once more. She tells herself, "It will do."❧

dead

Continued from page 59

"Only what the ghosts tell me."

"You are really weird."

"Gee. News flash."

He shook me.

I shoved my right hand into my pocket and pulled out my car keys, fisted them with some of them sticking out between my fingers, the way we'd been taught in self-defense class, though doing it one-handed was a lot harder, and raked his face with the keys. He yelped, let go of me, and staggered backward.

I ran for my car, trailed by Roger, Minnie, and Hazel. I couldn't get the key in the lock, though; I was shaking too hard. "Hurry up! Hurry up!" Roger said. "Damn it, Julia!"

"That's helping," I muttered, finally shaking loose the right key and getting it into the keyhole.

Heavy breathing and even heavier steps came up behind me, and then stalker guy crushed me against my car. "You bitch."

"Oh, that's original," I whispered. The keys, caught in the car lock, were digging into my hip. Stalker guy smelled like bad aftershave and sweat. He was bulky under his coat.

"Leave her alone!" Hazel yelled. She flashed and fluoresced and flickered into another state, standing on my car. She looked about nine, with tight braids and freckles and a ragged pink dress with blood streaks on the front. "Get away from her!"

The weight left my back. "What!" said stalker guy.

I grabbed my keys, turned the one in the lock, jerked them loose, opened the door, and dived into the car. I slammed the door and locked it. Then I sat trying to get my breath.

Minnie materialized in the passenger seat, and Roger walked through the front of the car and dropped down into me.

"Come on," he said, or I said, without meaning to. He jerked my hand up and shoved the key into the ignition, pumped the gas pedal, started the car, put it in reverse, and we drove out of there while I was still adjusting to the roils in my stomach of having another ghost inside me. I was doing an automatic sort on Roger: pulling out what was keeping him here, figuring out how to solve it, sucking his sins free of his ghost self and into me so I could process and release them.

What was keeping Roger here?

Love.

He loved me.

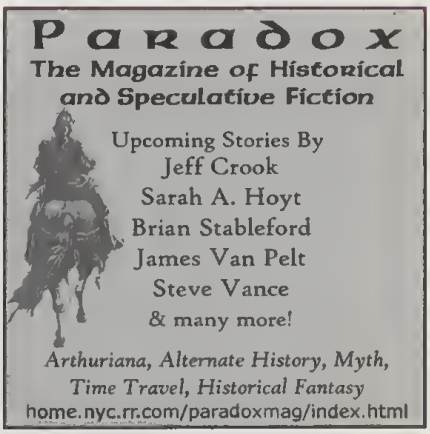
He knew we didn't have a future, but he couldn't get himself to let go.

"Julia!" screamed Minnie. I looked ahead of us and realized I was driving 35 miles an hour straight toward a tree. I swerved, got the car back on the road, headed for town, tears streaming down my face.

By the time I reached the police station, Roger was gone.❧







brains

Continued from page 32

Pretty, isn't she? I'm going to marry her."

"That's nice," I said.

"She's rich," he explained. "*Very* rich. I need the money. Do you have any idea what a schoolmaster makes?"

"No," I said.

"*No*," he echoed. "Of course you don't."

We clambered over one stone wall, then another. "It's funny," I remarked. "I just assumed she was seeing that other guy."

He stiffened. "What *other* guy?"

"You know," I prompted, "that tall young fellow. Who was alone with her in the kitchen late at night."

"Oh." The schoolmaster scowled. "*Him.*" He continued in a low, raspy tone. "She didn't tell me he was there. But yes, I know who you mean. He fancies that he might steal her away from me, but I know how to deal with *him.*" He fixed me with a long, hard gaze. "But first we must find your head. Come on."

Eventually our path led back to the pumpkin field. I could see the churchyard where I'd been buried. The small cemetery was dominated by the massive bole and branches of a looming oak tree—the one I'd crashed into that first night. A great dark hole pitted the center of its trunk.

The schoolmaster paced furiously about, sketching wildly with his quill pen. "Now... the cannon would have been ..." He stopped. "Here." He drew some more figures. "You would have been 30 feet away when the cannonball struck ... mounted. Hmm...forward momentum ... force equals mass times acceleration ... carry the two ... and ..." His head snapped up sharply and he glared at the lonely churchyard. "Follow me!"

We ran across the furrows, leapt another stone wall, and came to stand before the giant oak. A few blood-red leaves drifted past us as the schoolmaster reached into that hole in its trunk and, with an angry grunt, pulled forth a large, misshapen, blue-black cannonball. "Hold that," he told me, dropping it into my arms along with the rest of my burdens. My knees quivered as I stumbled from side to side, trying to keep my balance.

The schoolmaster reached back into the hole and yanked out my head by its thick, blond hair.

"My head!" I exclaimed. "You found it!" I began to practically vibrate with excitement.

"Of course. I told you I would." He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve, then he glared at me. "Would you knock it off with that stupid grin?"

"Sorry," I said. I bent down, and dumped everything I was carrying into a heap on the ground. I reached out with both hands. "Please, let me see it."

"I've fulfilled my part of the bargain," the schoolmaster intoned solemnly, passing the head into my waiting arms. "I've returned your head. Now there's something I want you to do for me."

"Sure, anything." I turned the head around in my hands, looking at it from all angles. It was a fine, well-formed German head. Not exactly handsome, but not bad looking either. There was something about it that made me vaguely uneasy though. Dare I say the countenance possessed a bit of a *sinister* cast? I shrugged, popped off my pumpkin head, and raised the recovered human head to my shoulders.

"You know that young man you saw? The one who's trying to steal my girl?" The schoolmaster grinned. "I want you to *kill him.*"

I used my new muscled throat to gasp. "I can't do that!"

Then memories started pouring back. Instantly I knew something was wrong. For these were not memories of glorious battle. These were dark, dismal, awful things, full of fire and black smoke, women screaming helplessly, and blood, so much blood everywhere. On my saber, on my hands ...

I stumbled, and said weakly, "No."

The schoolmaster was furious. "What do you mean you *can't?* You're a black spectre from beyond the grave, the shade of a Hessian mercenary who killed for money. Well, I've paid your price, phantom. I've given you your head, and now I want to be repaid. We have a deal!"

The women screaming. That was the worst part. I couldn't take their screaming. My God, what sort of monster had I *been?* How could I live another day, another *moment*, with these horrid memories? With this fiendish head? "No," I cried, "I won't do it. You can't make me."

He shouted, "What are you? Some kind of coward? Some kind of wimp? Some undead spirit *you've* turned out to be. They should call you the *dickless* horseman!"

White hot fury poured over me then. "All right!" I roared, standing tall. "That's it!"

I ... I don't really like to talk about what happened next. I got very agitated. It's all kind of a blur. I made a scene, started throwing things—like that pumpkin. It got broken. I try to blame it on that head I was wearing, that miserable Hessian head; it was the sort of thing *he* would have done; *he* once slit a man's throat for looking at him the wrong way, and the schoolmaster had given far more provocation than that.

It's an interesting issue actually, this matter of *self.* Do our brain and our memories make us who we are? Do they define our choices? Or do we really have free will? There are quite a few strong arguments on both sides. For example ...

But I'm stalling again. I'm sorry.

I have this tendency to ramble. To explain. To lecture. Maybe you've noticed. I try to fight it, but it's who I am now.

It's just one of those things that happens, I guess, when you have the head of a schoolmaster. ❧

pinioned

Continued from page 53

held to my chest. It's so soft, so light. I don't want to let it go. I don't want to let *her* go.

"You think I'm a monster, but I'm not. I love you. I've always loved you. You see how much I trust you, darling? Here—come back to me soon." I hold it out to her like an offering.

Her eyes are wide and she doesn't hesitate for even a moment. She snatches it out of my hands, flings it over her shoulders. There's a crashing, tinkling noise as something huge and white crashes through the attic windows, breaking glass and thin wooden slats. I'm alone in the dusty attic, and not so much as a single feather remains of my wife.

But that's all right. She'll be back. I love her.

I go downstairs, closing the attic door firmly behind me. I don't dare destroy Aileen's unfinished cloak; the fear on her mother's face gives me too much pause. It might hurt Aileen, and I can't bear the thought. Besides, it's unfinished. Aileen can't fly away, not yet.

Aileen is sitting curled up in the loveseat, her eyes as wide as her mother's had been. The television is off. She must have heard us arguing. Tears have made tracks on her downy young cheeks.

"Dearest, don't cry," I tell her, gathering her into my arms.

"Were you and Mommy fighting?"

"Yes, we were, but we're not going to any more. We love each other very much, angel."

"Where is she?" Aileen's eyes dart to the doorway, then back to me.

"She'll be back. Soon. She loves us, and we love her. Of course she'll be back. We'll wait here for her. In the meantime—" I lift her onto my lap. She's far too old for that, of course, but she snuggles into my chest, glad of the comfort.

"Let me tell you a story, honey. A story about magic swans, like the ones your teacher told you about, but far older. There are some swans, you see, who are only people when they take their feathers off. Every night they land on a certain riverbank. They shed their feather cloaks and become people. They bathe in the water and laugh and play." I can hear it in my head, Selene's crystalline laughter, silent for the last 10 years, as it bounced off of the dark water.

"Is that true, Daddy?"

"Your grandfather told me it was. And if you take one of those swan-women's cloaks, they have to stay with you. They're fairy-women, precious. And fairies like to roam ... but they like to have homes, too. They always come back to the ones they love."

I settle my daughter more comfortably on my chest. Surely, Selene won't be long. She's just stretching her wings, remembering how to fly. In a couple of hours ... or a couple of days, at most, she'll be back.

She has to be. I love her. ❧

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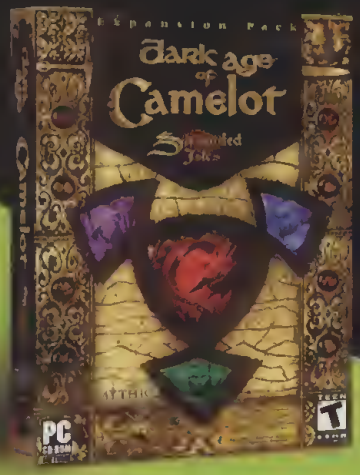


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